



MARYLAND OFFICE OF THE
INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR EDUCATION

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VIA EMAIL (mlankford@somerset.k12.md.us)

Mr. Matthew W. Lankford
Board of Education Chairperson
Somerset County Public Schools
7982A Tawes Campus Drive
Westover, Maryland 21871

Ref: OIGE Case 25-0263-C

Management Alert Report

Somerset County Public Schools – School Curriculum and Board Conduct

Dear Mr. Lankford,

The Office of the Inspector General for Education (OIGE) has received complaints alleging that the Somerset County Public Schools Board of Education (SCPS-BOE) has repeatedly failed to conduct school board business professionally and has placed staff and students of SCPS at risk by not adopting a comprehensive curriculum plan for the school year (SY) 2025-2026.

This Management Alert Report (MAR) focuses on Somerset County Public Schools (SCPS) employees and the citizens of Somerset County, Maryland, concerning the school board's decision regarding the education curriculum, potential SCPS funding issues, and the alleged behavior of SCPS-BOE members.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CURRICULUM

Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the department is required to use the school accountability results to identify those schools with the lowest performance across student groups (e.g., individual racial/ethnic student groups, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged, and English learners). Additionally, these guidelines require states to monitor

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achievement gaps in schools closely. An achievement gap occurs when one group of students performs less well than their peers.

Furthermore, each year, the MSDE examines schools' performance across several different indicators to provide an overall look at how schools are serving the needs of all students. The MSDE included the following indicators in its analysis of school accountability:

- Academic Achievement
- Academic Progress
- Graduation Rate
- Progress in Achieving English Language Proficiency
- Readiness for Post-Secondary Success
- School Quality and Student Success

Flagging achievement gaps is one way to say that a school can't excel if some students are being left behind. By identifying student groups that are falling behind, educators can focus more attention on bringing those students up to speed.

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) develops curriculum frameworks to support Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in providing high-quality instructional programs. This framework guides the implementation of the state standards, which are reviewed and adopted by the Maryland State Board of Education (MSBOE). These standards are outlined in COMAR 13A.04 and require LEAs to align their curriculum with the state's standards for each subject matter. This framework ensures that students receive a well-rounded education across a range of subject areas.

OIGE's review of SCPS's current English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum indicates that it was developed internally by a school system and is referred to as a "home-grown curriculum." MSDE discourages this method due to its difficulty in ensuring quality and alignment with broader state standards.

Our review demonstrated that the SCPS Executive Staff had been collaborating with MSDE to develop a curriculum using High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) that meet federal and state standards. This process began in January of 2024 and used a pilot curriculum during the SY 2024-2025.

OIGE reviewed MSDE grant award data and found that SCPS was recently awarded \$10,479,027 through the Read and Learn Grant program (\$5,537,660 for K-5 and \$4,941,367 for 6-12) to support educational program development and implementation costs. These funds enable SCPS to develop an ELA curriculum using HQIM and strategies applicable to both grade categories.

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OIGE reviewed the SCPS-BOE meetings in June and July 2025. During the June 17, 2025, meeting, the board elected to table the discussion related to school curriculum and rescheduled it for July. In the SCPS-BOE July meeting, the board discussed the proposed curriculum but failed to reach a majority vote (2-2) on approving the school curriculum. (OIGE noted that although SCPS-BOE has five board member positions, it has maintained a vacant board member position for months.)

The SCPS-BOE should also be aware that the following citations from House Bill 1300 (Chapter 36 of the 2020 Regular Session), The Blueprint for Maryland's Future, also demonstrate that both the MSDE and the Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB) are empowered to require county boards of education to adopt and implement state-approved curriculum materials, and to intervene when a board obstructs implementation.

Curriculum Implementation Requirement:

- *"Beginning in the 2022–2023 school year, each county board shall use curriculum frameworks and instructional materials that are aligned with the college and career readiness standards and that have been adopted or developed by the State Department of Education and approved by the Accountability and Implementation Board. -HB1300 (Chapter 36), under §7–203.5: Curriculum Requirements*
- This clause mandates that all local education agencies adopt HQIMs that are aligned to state standards and approved at the state level. Local boards do not have discretion to substitute or reject such materials if approved by MSDE and AIB. This applies across all grade bands, including grades 6–12.

AIB Enforcement Authority:

- *"If the AIB determines that a county board is not making sufficient progress or is not in compliance... it may direct MSDE to withhold funds, require a corrective action plan, and implement other enforcement actions." -HB 1300 (Chapter 36), under Section 5–405: Accountability and Implementation Board*
- This provision authorizes the AIB to take corrective action—including directing the withholding of Blueprint funds—if a county board is not complying with Blueprint implementation requirements such as curriculum adoption.

MSDE Authority to Trigger State Comptroller Action:

- *"After notification from the State Superintendent that a county board is not complying with the provisions of the State program of public education, the State Comptroller shall withhold any installment due the county board from the General State School Fund." - HB1300 (Chapter 36), under Section 5–205(e): Payments to County Boards*

- This clause gives MSDE additional authority to escalate noncompliance through the State Comptroller, reinforcing the seriousness of local board obligations under state law.

OIGE warns that if SCPS-BOE is actively blocking the adoption or implementation of MSDE- and AIB-approved HQIM, such actions would be in direct violation of Education Article §7–203.5. This citation establishes the legal foundation for review, intervention, and potential enforcement by AIB or MSDE.

BOARD CONDUCT

During the open discussion period, board members expressed that they should have been involved earlier in the curriculum vetting process and that they should not have been presented with such a decision this late in the selection process. When a SCPS staff member asked the board what their next steps were, a board member replied, “You want the Board to tell you your next step?”

The OIGE conducted a further review of the timeline of events surrounding the curriculum pilot project. Our review revealed that SCPS developed an implementation timeline that was shared with the board in a closed session on March 19, 2024. On April 10, 2024, the SCPS curriculum needs, and pilot process were discussed during the County Parent Advisory Committee meeting. On October 21, 2024, SCPS staff hosted a pilot curriculum discussion at the SCPS-BOE. Finally, on May 20, 2025, SCPS staff presented a formal request to the SCPS-BOE to adopt the recommended curriculum. If adopted, SCPS staff planned to begin implementation on September 2, 2025. Based on OIGE’s review of the curriculum review process, we could not substantiate the board members’ claim that they have not been involved in the review process. (OIGE noted that two of the five board members assumed their positions in 2025.)

OIGE is concerned that actions, or the lack thereof, have placed SCPS, its students, and teachers in a tenuous position. The failure to make a curriculum decision before the August 30, 2025, grant deadline could jeopardize Somerset County’s eligibility for one-time Read and Learn Grant funding.

During our review, OIGE found that on several occasions, the board exhibited signs of frustration with public attendees due to disagreements over educational positions when discussing proposed policy changes and budgetary issues. On two occasions, the board requested that the public be removed from the hearing room.

OIGE is concerned that these actions contradict the role and responsibilities of a board member and could interfere with the transparency of SPCS's decision-making. The board must maintain a balance of decorum when conducting meetings and engaging with the community. A request to “clear” a board meeting room is extreme and could only escalate an already intense situation, putting attendees and school staff at risk.

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Lastly, the OIGE is concerned that the SCPS-BOE recently provided a list of 18 acceptable books to SCPS staff, identified as “Notable Nobel Prize Winners and Their Famous Works,” to serve as the basis for their school curriculum subject matter. In this case, SCPS-BOE has not specified its standards for vetting these books, nor has it outlined its standards for instruction using the identified books. Furthermore, OIGE is concerned that these books and the method used to vet them are not reflective of a comprehensive literacy program aligned with Maryland State standards.

OIGE recommends that the SCPS-BOE directly consult with MSDE and the SBOE regarding state standards requirements governing curriculum standards. Failure to take immediate action could result in the loss of critical educational funds, unnecessary legal actions, and undue hardships for the citizens of Somerset County. Additionally, SCPS-BOE delay could further jeopardize SCPS students' eligibility to meet state standards and obtain the essential requirements for graduation.

OIGE is referring this matter back to the Somerset County Board of Education and the Maryland State Board of Education for consideration and future action.

Respectfully,



Richard P. Henry
Inspector General

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