

# Somerdale Park School District, NJ



## Engaging Teachers and Equipping Them to Lead

### HOW TEACHER-DRIVEN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IS SUPPORTING STUDENT GROWTH IN SOMERDALE

When Superintendent Dennis Vespe came to Somerdale Park School District, he was very interested in strengthening teachers' capacity to track student growth and progress. To do this, he knew the district needed to enhance its "ability to accurately assess and accurately drive instruction." But years of experience had taught him that new tools and assessments require teacher engagement, as well as a shared vision for how to use these resources to help students learn.

This kind of engagement defined the process of choosing a new interim assessment from the very start - teachers were the key decision-makers. By giving teachers ownership of a major initiative, Vespe quickly earned teacher buy-in. "Once you have trust, then you really start to accelerate," says Vespe. For Somerdale teachers, the top priorities for a new assessment were a reliable measure of student growth and data to inform instructional decisions. After piloting six different assessments, the teachers selected MAP® Growth™ from NWEA™.

"We wanted a valid way to track progress," says teacher Mandy Seligman. "MAP Growth data plays a key role in levelling students appropriately, so the data really drives

our instruction. For me, MAP Growth data has been a huge help in identifying kids that need help, as well as kids that are doing extremely well."

According to NWEA data coach Nelson Monroe, who works with Somerdale teachers, the district's approach is enabled by a clear vision on the intent and purpose of MAP Growth. "Success with MAP Growth requires leaders to clearly communicate, 'We're using MAP Growth for x, y, and z,'" Monroe explains. "And the teachers were already using data—they had that data-driven philosophy."

### Teacher-Driven Professional Learning

"When we adopted MAP Growth, there was a huge commitment to professional development," says Seligman. These opportunities were designed to help teachers "understand what MAP Growth testing was actually doing, what the data means, and how to read the reports." Seligman notes that because there's a lot of information, these early learning opportunities were important for empowering teachers to use MAP Growth confidently. As Vespe says, there were no expectations that "in one week they become a data analysis expert."

Additionally, ongoing MAP Growth support fits seamlessly with Somerdale's commitment to ensuring that teachers benefit from professional learning community (PLC) time.

Scheduled to guarantee that time is protected, PLC blocks afford Somerdale teachers with 240 minutes of time per month dedicated to collaboration—supplemented with additional support sessions with Monroe three times each year.

This teacher collaboration time has been crucial for advancing their capabilities with MAP Growth data. “There isn’t a profession around that doesn’t demand that you constantly sharpen your skills because the jobs are always changing,” Vespe says. “With that belief in PLC time for increasing their professional acumen, implementing an initiative for data analysis just falls right into place.”

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**Mandy Seligman, Teacher**  
Somerdale Park School District, NJ

### Placing Student Growth at the Forefront

For Somerdale teachers, student growth is a priority. Seligman notes that rather than focusing on student achievement in an absolute sense, “The goal is to have students grow, no matter where they start.” This goal correlates well with MAP Growth, as teachers and students have intentional conversations about RIT scores at the beginning of the school year and set goals for their projected scores. “It encourages students to work harder,” says Seligman. These conversations also help students to take ownership of their own learning. Vespe likes to say to students about growth, “That’s where your MAP Growth score took you.”

Student growth is a key metric for the Somerdale district as a whole. Vespe notes that one of the most important ways that the district measures its performance is by using RIT scores to track the number of students who are meeting their goals. These data also give teachers and administrators evidence as to which instructional approaches are working and which ones need to be revised—offering additional opportunities for educators to grow and learn themselves. As Seligman noted, “If one classroom is growing a lot, we can learn from what they are doing.” Vespe adds, “We are growing each year in our understanding of the data.”

Finally, MAP Growth is helping Somerdale make sure all students grow. “Before MAP Growth, it was difficult to make sure we weren’t letting anyone slip through the cracks,” Seligman notes. “With MAP Growth, it’s so easy to identify the kids that you need to make sure you are reaching. It’s been a huge help.”



## District Snapshot

SOMERDALE, NJ



PRE-K-8TH GRADE STUDENTS

**500**

ECONOMIC MARKERS

**40%**

OF STUDENTS QUALIFY FOR  
FREE OR REDUCED-PRICE LUNCH

PRODUCT USE

IMPLEMENTED MAP GROWTH IN

**2013**

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