

# **Saunders Middle School**

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## **Introduction**

“Saunders means Success!” This is not just a motto but a reality. Success is experienced by both the students and the staff. A rigorous course of study is provided so that students can attain their personal best during these middle years. Behavioral expectations are high; parent-teacher partnerships are encouraged and effective; and a sense of pride in accomplishments is fostered for each adolescent. Extracurricular activities provide interest-based opportunities for the students. Late buses at 5 o’clock each day and 4 o’clock twice a week allow students to participate in clubs and sports without transportation worries. Test scores and student success in high school attest to the strength of Saunders Middle School. All of this is the result of strong personal relationships between the teachers and students.

## **Prince William County**

Prince William County Public Schools, with a student enrollment of 72,654, is the second-largest school division in Virginia. The county population has grown 35.2% since 2000, and is expected to double its current population by 2030. Today, Prince William County is a suburban community linked to the Washington metropolitan area, yet has an appreciation for its own history, natural features, and rural roots.

The Prince William County School Division has a total of 86 schools. Student demographics reflect a rich diversity, with 40.6% White, 25% Hispanic, 22.4% Black, 7.3% Asian, and 4.7% other ethnicities.

Prince William County Public Schools is well known for its system of school-based management, which places decision making and accountability at the school level. Initiatives include specialty instructional programs at every level, teacher committees that guide the transition and implementation of the curriculum, a multicultural program, a health and wellness program, an antibullying program, state-of-the-art technology infrastructure, and pioneering use of instructional support teams that work with schools and teachers at the classroom level. Prince William County Public Schools received the Medallion of Excellence, a U.S. Senate Productivity and Quality Award, presented to businesses and municipalities that demonstrate productivity and quality excellence.

## **The Saunders’ Story**

During this recent period of time, our student population became much more diverse. Our overall minority population increased from 29.6% for 1999–00 to 62.3% for 2007–08. The number of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch grew from 7.1% in 1999–00 to 19% in 2007–08. The number of gifted and talented students dropped from 187 to 145, while the special education population grew from 119 to 130. This school year, 2007–08, was the second year Saunders had an in-house program for the 120 ESOL students. This was probably the most dramatic change, as this program is only in its second year at the school. Many would hold that these changes in the student body should hamper success; the Saunders data attest to the opposite. The school has been fully accredited since 2000 and achieved adequate yearly progress until 2006 when a new state test went into place. Every effort is being made to again attain these targets for 2007–08.

## **Organizational Structures**

As a site-based management school, all of the stakeholders have a voice. The Principal's Advisory Council is comprised of teachers, parents, and students. The school plan is developed by this group with input from the community at large. Department chairpersons meet regularly to share concerns and plan for the coming year. Teams meet with their concerns and suggestions as well. Departments meet and work together to analyze data and plan for improving student achievement. The vertically aligned curriculum in each of the core areas is posted in the hall. The Administrative Team meets regularly to discuss school issues and plan for coming events. Professional learning communities at each level work collaboratively to research best practices and share expertise for the benefit of both staff and students. Saunders has an active Teachers as Readers group who devote their attention to areas in need of additional strategies for student achievement.

The 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades are organized into teams, and each team is given the opportunity to use its block of time to best suit the needs of their students. Teams have developed very specific identities, and their spaces in the building are labeled and adorned according to the team name. Special education students are part of a team and share in all of the field trips and celebrations that the team plans. Gifted students are scheduled onto teams in an equitable manner so that classes are truly heterogeneous. At the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level, teams are not possible due to the variety of courses available. Spanish, French, and Algebra provide high school credit, and these classes along with music options make teaming unworkable.

Saunders moved to a block schedule this year in an effort to increase time in math and language arts. These meet every day for approximately 85 minutes, and science and social studies meet on alternating days for the same amount of time.

Saunders does not sound bells to change classes, as a staggered release schedule is in place. Each grade level changes class at a different time, and within the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades, the teams also stagger their class changes. This makes for smooth transitions, less crowding in halls, and fewer discipline problems, as students are visible to the staff as they move. It also ensures that the teacher dismisses the class and not the bell.

## **Academic Excellence**

All aspects of the student learning are reflected in the design and flow of instruction. Instruction utilizing multimodal and differentiated strategies is employed to meet each student's unique learning style. As the school year progresses, reflections on the unit maps are annotated so that the overall plan for covering the curriculum in a timely manner is based on experience and insight.

Sixth, seventh, and eighth grade teachers in a specific content area meet as a group before the school year begins to analyze the scores on state assessments. They are directed to first look for the highest scores by objective. Then the lowest scores are identified. Next, they brainstorm how instruction in the strongest areas differed from that in the weakest areas. At this session, the teachers also look at the curriculum vertically to determine areas of overlap. Having everyone own the outcome at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade enhances their involvement with delivering effective instruction. They agree to stress some objectives at each grade level so that the overall plan ensures that all objectives are taught and reviewed. For example, the scientific method is introduced in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and reviewed in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. Once this vertical piece is agreed to, teachers break into grade level meetings.

Subject area teachers, including the special education teachers, meet by grade level prior to the school year. They analyze the data by objective and modify the time needed to cover each of the curriculum areas. Ongoing assessments are also built into the map and constitute the formative evaluation. Curriculum maps are posted in the main corridor of the building. This provides parents and teachers with a scope and sequence in each of the content areas and a more specific timeframe for learning. This display also serves as a tool for identifying areas for cross-curricular planning and instruction. Each classroom has a white board outside on which the teachers post the day's learning objective. This informs the

students but also lets the teachers and administrators know what the student is encountering in each of their classes during the day.

Teachers at each grade level, including the special education teachers, have common planning time, and it is their ongoing task to monitor progress and the timeline during these periods. Also at these times, they can adjust the pace instruction to meet the needs of individual classes.

The curriculum is developed centrally and is aligned with the state standards of learning. It is a rare occurrence when a Saunders staff member is not a part of these committees. They participate in all aspects of curriculum and assessment development and implementation. Often, it is the Saunders direction that is followed, as the staff is recognized in the district as being innovative and sensitive to students' developmental needs. Our Special Education Department and remedial program have both been replicated at other middle schools in the district.

### **Encore Classes**

The Art and Music Departments provide very demanding but rewarding experiences. A replica of the Saunders student-designed Youth Art Month Flag that was the state winner still hangs in the school cafeteria. The students have the opportunity to create original pottery pieces using the kiln-fired method. For the last two years, pottery pieces of our 8<sup>th</sup> graders were used on the cover of the Prince William County Schools Art Fair brochure. The Art Club, which meets after school, has grown from a group of 20 to almost 60 and now requires three staff members.

The Music Department provides the opportunity for students to begin to learn an instrument through Beginning Strings for 6<sup>th</sup> graders and Beginning Band for 7<sup>th</sup> Graders. Strings historically begins in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and Band in 6<sup>th</sup>. Saunders music students earn the highest ratings at both the division and district level. Twice in the last three years, Saunders Music Department received the state's highest commendation—"Blue Ribbon Music Department"—because all three performance groups received the highest possible scores at district festival. To encourage more students to engage in music, we have added Drum Circle at 7<sup>th</sup> grade. At the last pep rally, this group performed the music for our Step Team.

Sponsored by the Kennedy Center four times during the year, music students have the opportunity to attend special performances by touring professional companies. In the spring, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade chorus students attend a production of a musical at one of the local dinner theatres. The chorus usually presents a musical at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade and has done such shows as *The Music Man* and *Guys and Dolls* and several musical revues.

The Exploratory Program includes Fine Arts, Family and Consumer Science, Technology Education, and an advisory program. In 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades, all students rotate through these components. In the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, students select to remain either in music or to participate in the Exploratory Program. Both the FACS and Tech Ed have modular work stations as part of their programs. Technology is a key component in each of these classes, as it is in the core curriculum.

### **Instructional Strategies**

Students' needs and age-appropriate activities are the driving forces behind everything at Saunders Middle School. Teachers are encouraged to attend conferences whenever the opportunity is presented. In a given year, about one third of the staff will attend some conference or in-service session outside school. It is truly an innovative and self-actualizing staff. The entire staff integrates the use of Thinking Maps into their instruction. Hands-on activities are a part of instruction in all content areas. Flip books, graphs, charts, models, and dimensional maps give students a variety of modalities with which to master content. Creative student work is on display all over the building. Inclusion classes are so designed that it is difficult to identify which is the special educator and which is the classroom teacher. Gifted as well as special education students are serviced in inclusion classes but also have specialized opportunities for enrichment and support.

Technology is imbedded as a matter of practice. We are in our third year using video streaming, which often raises the level of interest of students. "Study Island," which is Web-based and often done from home, is used for special populations and students at risk as a review tool. Each student has a personal folder on the school's hard drive, and both students and teachers can access this to add to or modify work.

Students are currently developing a wellness plan for their three years at Saunders, and this too is stored electronically and will be sent to the high school when the time comes.

Literacy is a focus, and the departments, including the encore staff, set a goal for this year to have all students speak in complete sentences. The level of cooperation within the staff models for the students the belief that what they learn is important in all aspects of life.

### **The Home-School Connection**

Technology has opened the way to ongoing communication between school and home. This partnership is enhanced at Saunders by use of "School Fusion," a Web site that provides the opportunity for teachers to have their own Web pages where they can post daily homework and class announcements. Many have links to sites that support their curriculum, as well as drill and practice activities. Morning announcements are uploaded to the Web site homepage allowing parents to monitor after school activities and other important announcements. "Edu-link" is another resource used to keep parents informed of student performance. Parents can apply and be assigned a password that allows them to view the grade book pages for their child, monitor grades, access the lunch account balance and add funds by use of a credit card, and check attendance records. Parents are now silent visitors to the school and classroom and can monitor student performance daily.

With the increase in diversity, a parent liaison was added to the staff. This person is bilingual (Spanish/English) and translates all important letters and flyers, duplicates call-out messages in Spanish, and acts as a translator at conferences and phone calls. This is a key component in making families who are not fluent in English feel part of the school community. Displayed in the cafeteria are 57 flags representing the countries from which our students and their parents have emigrated. Again, these flags serve as a nonverbal welcome to Saunders.

### **Before and After School**

Saunders is a busy place, starting early in the morning. Two teachers arrive an hour early to be available to students needing help to get the day moving successfully. Called the Survivors Club, there are about 15 regulars per group who receive help with the previous night's homework or a review lesson that benefits all. Students from each grade level work together, and often a student will bring a friend for help. There is academic support after school also. The Homework Club requires four teachers and meets twice weekly for any student needing help. High school students assist with this and earn service credit. The Computer Lab is available after school for those who do not have access at home. The activity buses allow students to participate in these opportunities, even if parents are not available for transportation. All that being said, teachers stay at least once a week to offer help or guidance for students who need it.

After school there are a wide variety of interest-based clubs and activities. Clubs can be as standard as Student Council and Honor Society or as unique as Nippon Club and Cartooning. Clubs seasons run parallel to the sports seasons so that new students can join throughout the year. This allows for exploration of different types of activities, but a child can stay in the club if he or she has a particular interest. Some, such as Yearbook Club, run all year. Sports are a big part of school life, and in Prince William County we operate a districtwide competitive program. We have three sport seasons, including football, soccer, track, volleyball, basketball, wrestling, baseball and softball. Each year at the end of the basketball season, there is a faculty-varsity game. Supporting these teams are the Cheerleaders, the Dance Team, and the Step Team.

## **Positive Discipline Program**

Parents and teachers worked together to design a schoolwide discipline plan. This is published in the front of the students' agendas, and the consequences for violations are clearly stated. This plan is reviewed and updated each spring. Saunders also has a tardy policy in place, and students understand the importance of being on time. There is an escalation of consequences from detentions of one or two hours to "PMAD" (PM Alternative Discipline)—three hours of detention after school to "Saturday School" to, finally, out-of-school suspension. Parent support for both the discipline plan and the consequences is necessary for effectiveness. This year we have implemented random Tardy Sweeps. Teachers inform the administration when they observe an increase of students tardy at a particular class change. Administrators then monitor the areas of the building where these classes are being held, the principal announces when the classroom doors should be closed, and any students still in the halls without late passes are corralled, names recorded, and letters for parents are given. Again, first instance is a warning, and then consequences escalate. This has been successful beyond expectations.

For those students who are reluctant to participate in their education, we have instituted a program called "Uplift." Students are identified by teachers for poor work habits, low grades, and less than appropriate behavior. These students are put on a daily contract that is checked each day by an administrator. Rewards are given, and because of the intense level of monitoring by someone other than parent or teacher, about 40% per grading period no longer need the contract and maintain acceptable behavior and grades. There is also the "Lunch Bunch." Teachers have the opportunity to leave missing assignments in a file in the cafeteria each day. When a student does not have their homework, the teacher puts the assignment in the file, and the child does it in lieu of standing in the lunch line, socializing, and eating with his or her friends. When there is no longer a line, the student is directed to get lunch and eat. Most quickly realize they would rather follow the standard lunch routine than do missing homework. For those reluctant to comply, there is Saturday School, assigned when students fall behind in homework. Together, these encourage doing homework on time. The policy of the staff is "Missing assignments—not an option."

## **Conclusion**

Nothing is fixed—change and adaptation are a given. The only constants are the high expectations for both academic achievement and student behavior. Saunders is not static. Just as students and their needs change, so must the program. This is the challenge. The staff is self-motivated and proud of the way they have managed to move forward and maintain a high level of success. As the first part of this report indicates, Saunders is a very different school from what it was in 2000. These eight years have seen a change in the student body with regard to diversity, skill level, and socioeconomics. The staff is also changing, as many long-term members are retiring. The culture of the school welcomes the new teachers, and within a short time, they are on board with our forward-looking and innovative program.

Saunders meets the needs of the early adolescents it teaches; it addresses the mandates that are put in place by state and federal agencies; and its spirit and mission are a vital part of each student's life. The challenges faced by the staff at Saunders occur in other schools. Learning from the success of others is what makes schools function effectively. At Saunders, the administration and staff are continually looking for strategies and programs that meet the needs of our changing school community. Saunders means Success! Success for All! And it's that quest that invigorates and drives us.