



Lex-Wiki.Org is a local Wikipedia for Lexington, MA. Lex-wiki.Org covers Arts and Entertainment, Local Flora and Fauna, Local History, City Life as well as Town Government and other issues of public interest in Lexington.

Name: Jessie Steigerwald

Web Site Address: www.lexvoteforjessie.com

Phone: (781) 861-7190

Email: jess@shininghours.com

Submission Date: Feb 7, 2015

Biographical Question

1. What can you tell us about yourself? Please include a brief outline of your relevant experience, including public offices held and volunteer service in Lexington schools.

Public elected offices:

School Committee (2009-present)

- Policy Manual Subcommittee, Chair
- Quarterly Curriculum Updates
- Liaison to Youth Services Council, Ad Hoc Community Center Task Force, Human Services, PTA/PTO Presidents' Council, Site-Based School Council Roundtable (SBSC), EDCO, MASC, Lexington Education Secretaries Association (LEA-Unit D)

Town Meeting Member, Precinct 8 (2006-present)

Hastings Site-Based School Council Parent Representative (approx. 2003-2007)

Public appointments:

Lexington Council for the Arts, Appointed by Board of Selectmen (2013-present)

300th Anniversary Celebration Committee, Appointed By Board of Selectmen (2010-2014)

- Events Co-Chair (2010-2013)
- Opening Ceremony & Closing Ceremony, Writer, Co-Director, Co-Producer
- Breeches, Bloomers & Bellbottoms: Oh My!, Author, Director, Co-Producer
- Lexington Then And Now, Comic Book Project Coordinator
- We Are Lexington: Celebrating 300 years 1713-2013, Author

Ad Hoc Town-wide Facilities Master Planning Committee (2012-2013)

Volunteer service in Lexington:

8th Grade Mock Town Meeting Volunteer Coordinator

ICE Block, Diamond, Guest Instructor for creative problem-solving workshop

Destination Imagination / Odyssey of the Mind (2002-2015)

- *Range of roles over the years: Coach, Town-Wide Coordinator, Before/After School Workshop Instructor, Instant Challenge Night*

Golden Tricorne Committee (2013-present)

League of Women Voters of Lexington, Board Member (Education Portfolio) (approx. 2009-2013)

Hastings PTA President (approx. 2007-09)

Volunteer for EPA's Indoor Air Quality Program "Tools for Schools"

20/20 Budget Taskforce (2004-2005)

Greeley Village Garden Therapy Group, Lexington Garden Club (first volunteer work in Lexington, approx. 1997-1998)

School volunteer:

Elementary School Volunteer (2001-2009): Big Backyard, ACT (Arts Created Together), Diversity Book Bag Project, Family Math Night, Third Grade Recycling instructor (town-wide), STAR Newsletter, Library volunteer, All-School Meeting volunteer, 2nd grade Root Tunnel

Middle School & High School (2007-2015): Destination Imagination (see above), LHS Debate program (judge Public Forum debates, help at events), volunteer for drama program as needed

Candidate Platform

2. Why are you running for School Committee?

It has been an honor to serve on the School Committee for six years. Though I have served the town in other capacities, I believe my experience and skills are best employed in the service of fostering the best possible schools for our children, families and community.

The Lexington school system is beginning a new chapter as we welcome Dr. Czajkowski as our next superintendent. I believe I will be helpful during this transition period. There are many ongoing initiatives in a system this size. As an actively engaged member of the School Committee for six years, and a school volunteer for thirteen years, I am familiar with the history and current status of these initiatives, and I want to be certain that they continue.

The important work that I would like to continue includes:

- Pursuing our District Improvement Goals, which include recommendations to improve learning for all students, support decreased student stress, extend the wireless infrastructure for our growing technology initiative, enrich our professional development offerings, and improve safety at every school.

- Solidifying a better process to review our policies by completing the current Policy Manual Review and then establishing the Massachusetts Association of School Committee's recommended 3-year cycle where one-third of our policies are reviewed each year.
- Providing excellent support for our Site-Based School Council members so they are well prepared to advise principals who develop annual School Improvement Plans for each school. Those who advise the principals benefit from an overview of the District Goals and an introduction to the staff members who are guiding progress on each goal.
- Developing protocols to comply with the state's new superintendent evaluation process. We began the new system this past year and I believe we can do a better job if we obtain more guidance from the MASC's School Governance project and establish a subcommittee to focus on this work.
- Improve inter-board collaboration as we move forward to address rising student enrollment. We will need additional space for new students and we will also need to project and manage expenses for the additional required staff.
- Expand collaboration with school committees in our neighboring communities. I have built a growing network with colleagues in our area and we share an interest in pursuing changes which may require several towns to act simultaneously, like trying to change school start time and promoting student mental health initiatives.
- Initiating a Strategic Plan process. Working with Dr. Ash we have better aligned our School Improvement Plans with District Goals and the Site-Based School Council training. We have better mid-range capital plans and a new approach to enrollment forecasting. I believe the next step is to integrate these into a strategic plan that looks forward 3-5 years. Realistically, most of our "annual" goals take more than a year to achieve.

3. *What do you believe are the priorities for our schools in the short-term and long-term?*

LPS is a large organization, and there are so many important priorities that it is not possible to address them all in 2 or 3 paragraphs. I will focus on our most important overarching system goal which is to offer an excellent education for all children in Lexington, and our most urgent near-time priority, which is addressing capital needs and rising enrollments. This answer focuses on the education goal and the next answer focuses on capital needs.

The education we provide must see children as more than scholars. Even as they are students while at school, we need every child to learn how to learn, and to prepare to become a productive adult, who can make healthy choices, participate in the community, and develop leadership skills to guide the future.

Lexington schools are places for children to pursue academic development and I am proud that we have made great progress during my two terms to try to meet the needs of all learners. We use technology in innovative ways to provide interventions and extensions, bringing students greater support when they struggle, or challenge when they exceed grade-level expectations. We developed a new elementary report card that makes skill evaluation more transparent so parents/guardians can better understand their child's progress. We embed meaningful professional development so that

our staff (from secretaries to teachers to administrators) continues to improve their skills. We recognize and address the needs of specific groups of learners, including students in our English Language Learners (ELL) program, our METCO program, and our special education programs, including those in our Intensive Learning Program (ILP).

However, we can still improve. One area is in the way we address social-emotional growth for all students. For too long this has been treated as a secondary goal. I understood why, but I did not agree with the priority. This year the School Committee unanimously supported elevating this to a District Goal, placing it on center stage. We have now set an expectation that the administration will make this a daily priority. I know we can do more, both within LPS and by working with municipal departments. One way we collaborate is through the Youth Service Council. I believe we are united in the goal to foster connections between staff and community members to openly address mental health needs, provide more flexibility for students with different learning styles and anxiety levels, and to dispel the idea that LHS is a place where only the most academically competitive students are valued.

Policy Questions

4. *Lexington public school enrollment is projected to increase in the short and medium term. Five of our six elementary schools and our two middle schools are running out of capacity. What are your priorities regarding school capital construction needs, and how do you see the role of the School Committee in this discussion?*

I will first write about our role.

Lexington’s school capital projects are funded by taxpayers and, as an elected School Committee member, I believe my job is to invest the time necessary to understand our capital needs and to identify what I believe is the best way to provide quality educational space for all students. I then need to reach consensus with my committee, which may require us to compromise. Together, we must navigate the funding process to move forward on any project and on a plan that we believe can earn the support of other town officials and the community as a whole.

Ideally, I want our recommended projects to earn strong support from the Board of Selectmen, Appropriation Committee, Capital Expenditure Committee and Permanent Building Committee before they are presented to Town Meeting, and then to secure Town Meeting approval. The largest projects, those that require financing through a Debt Exclusion override, also require the approval of a majority of voting residents.

Part of our job is to work with the superintendent to facilitate a process that matches capital improvements with carefully measured needs. Dr. Ash convened the Enrollment Working Group to devise a more accurate enrollment forecast. We have worked with an architectural firm (Symmes, Maini, McKee & Associates) to obtain advice on the best way to add sufficient space to accommodate rising enrollment.

I support the conclusion of SMMA that we should build a new and larger Hastings, possible wings or additions at multiple elementary schools and both middle schools, as well as additional space at Lexington High School. However, before we seek a debt exclusion, we need to develop these

concepts further into a solution that is attainable, efficient and realistic. No matter what, it is clear that we have an urgent need to address current overcrowding and projected higher enrollments.

5. *What are your criteria for supporting a debt exclusion override to cover capital cost needs for school building construction?*

To go forward with a debt-exclusion override, whether it is for a school or municipal project, we should be able to demonstrate to residents that we have identified a clear need or problem, a solution that is timely and attainable, a price tag that we believe is realistic, a strategy for funding the debt service that will be achievable, and we should very honestly and openly inform people about what will happen if the override fails.

Philosophically, I believe it is a good thing to require an extremely transparent process that allows residents to have a voice in authorizing major projects that require significant borrowing, or additional operational budget increases. Taxpayers fund these projects, and without any relief from state agencies, taxpayers are completely responsible.

As we consider the challenges of rising student enrollment, I believe we will be required to ask voters to support major investments in school facilities. Please see my answer to question four above for more information.

We also need to expand the conversation to understand that our need for additional staff will also grow as the student population rises. We have not had an operating override in the time I have been on the School Committee, but I have experienced the impact of both a failed and passed override. Questions we should ask now include whether we will be able to keep up with rising expenses if we maintain our current staff structure, or whether we will need to find new ways to streamline. Having a new superintendent, with her own range of experiences, offers a fresh look at our system and will help us plan wisely for the next five years.

In summary, my criteria are that the project we bring forward should be solutions we believe are wisely crafted, tailored to solve known or identifiable problems, timely, attainable, have a thoroughly evidenced feasibility, with realistic cost estimates and project completion schedules.

6. *Academic Stress & At Risk Social Behavior: The Ad-Hoc Committee for Youth at Risk has presented its recommendations to the School Committee in Nov 2014. What should be the School Committee action plan to address academic stress & at risk behavior, and how would you measure whether it is successful?*

We need to formulate and implement action steps to decrease unhealthy student stress. We have to move past the stage where we are trying to prove that there is too much stress, or that school activities are themselves a source of student stress. These points are not reasonably open to dispute, and even though there are other sources of stress, school activities are the area where School Committee has the authority to guide improvements.

The Ad-Hoc Committee for Youth at Risk presented a helpful report and my suggestion (the night we received the report) was to set up a clear process to evaluate their recommendations and make

formal requests of the Superintendent. My hope had been to incorporate more recommendations in the budget for 2015-16.

While I hoped the School Committee would take up my suggestion in November, I have since gone on, as liaison to the Youth Service Council (YSC), to gather information from school and town representatives to assess the report. It does not document the current work that is taking place, and I spoke to one committee member who shared that they had interviewed staff, but did not include that information in the report. It is critical for us to have that information and in January I asked Dr. Ash to provide the School Committee with an update on staff reactions to the report. He will provide this in the packet for our meeting on February 10, 2015.

I see two courses of action, given the transition to a new superintendent. One is to wait until July and one is to start now. Given the urgency, I think we should start now. I would set up a small subcommittee or task force with two School Committee members, Dr. Ash or Ms. Pilarski, a principal and a community representative and see which recommendations make sense for short-term application (this year or next) and which require more time. If the administration feels some should not be pursued, we should have an open dialogue to hear their views. Superintendents have discretion to adjust the budget to move resources and take advantage of new opportunities, so it is never too late to make a difference in a school year. However, some possible improvements, like changing block scheduling at the high school, changing school start times, changing graduation requirements, etc. will take longer to coordinate so we should begin these conversations now.

7. Special Education (SPED) in Lexington: What are, in your view, its strengths and its areas that could further improve? What sources do you use to inform your opinion about SPED, and what would you do as a School Committee member to continuously improve the quality of SPED in Lexington?

Special education programs in Lexington have improved during my tenure on the School Committee, thanks to unanimous support from the School Committee and superintendent on several key issues. We do not always start out in agreement, but we have had a good multi-year dialogue that keeps us moving forward on initiatives to support a large population of students who need specialized education services.

I am informed by students, parents, teachers and administrators. Over six years, I have closely studied our programs. Particularly informative have been the SEPAC parent surveys. It was not balanced to hear only the administration’s views of our programs. Hearing parent assessments made a huge difference. This is a range of reports we have received: <http://lps.lexingtonma.org/Page/2959>

Key areas where I have advocated for special education include:

- Annual budget adjustments to maintain or improve program quality
- Outside program reviews (though I was disappointed in the 2010 District Management Council report)
- Additional staff where we are able to create programs that allow Lexington children to stay in Lexington’s schools and receive appropriate services. I support in-district education that gives families the option to keep their children in our community schools, decreases student travel

time, and keeps siblings closer together. It frequently has a lower annual cost than out-of-district tuitions, but it does require a commitment to provide adequate space, and as programs grow, this may require additions to our schools. Phase 1 and 2 of the high school modular project help us expand in-district special education services.

- Providing increased “transitional” support for students who will be turning 18 and continue to require services. This need was clearly identified through one-on-one meetings with parents and we made progress in open budget discussions between the School Committee and superintendent.
- Decreasing case loads for special education staff who provide direct services to children.
- Creating additional support to allow students in the Intensive Learning Program to remain in Lexington as they moved from elementary to middle school, and from middle school to the high school. At each stage we had to commit resources to develop high-quality programs to retain students who would otherwise have needed to be educated out-of-district.
- Providing a second middle school location for the ILP program. For the first few years, our elementary ILP students all transitioned to Clarke. My daughter was peers with the first cohort of students to move from Hastings to Clarke. There were many persuasive arguments from parents to explain why a second cohort should begin at Diamond. I attended several meetings with parents, and between parents and administrators: I was happy to support a second ILP program at Diamond, I am glad we made this decision.

A major priority for the future is planning for program growth, and I believe we should consider working with the New England Center for Children to make a better plan for program growth. They most recently (October, 2013) advised us on growth of the ILP program at Lexington High School. As town-wide enrollments rise, we will have more students who need special education services and this will require strategic choices about staffing and use of space. I have requested that the administration tell us what they see as next steps if the ILP program at Fiske continues to grow. Students in this program need dedicated space outside their mainstream classroom. As enrollments rise in the next five years, I believe we should openly discuss the future location for a second cohort, or agree about how Fiske would change if we continue to house the program only at Fiske.

8. *The Lexington Minuteman reports that, on state assessments, “Lexington METCO students reached 100 percent proficiency in English/language arts, an improvement from 57 percent in 2007, [and] math proficiency increased to 96 percent from 68 percent in 2007”.*

How will the district maintain its level of focus on METCO student proficiency once Dr. Ash retires this June? Now that these high levels of proficiency have been reached on the MCAS, how would you measure success for the METCO program in the future?

Lexington has had a multi-decade commitment to the METCO program and we have made important strides in increasing academic support for students. In January 2008, Vito LaMura presented a pivotal report to the School Committee and superintendent called “The Achievement Gap in the Lexington Public Schools: Documentation, Research, and Recommendations.” Though I was not yet a member of the School Committee, I was in the audience as a PTA President who had been a METCO Family

Friend for several years and was passionate about addressing the visible achievement gap in Lexington. Mr. LaMura's work brought the problem into sharp focus. As a School Committee member, I have applauded our progress and appreciate Dr. Ash's commitment to the program – but I have also warned that it is too soon to say we have closed the entire Lexington achievement gap and more honest to say that we still have work to do. This is not to be harsh, but to make sure that we do not understate the true needs of our students.

There are often pros and cons to our choices. For example, in establishing Thursday afternoon academic support for elementary students who participate in METCO, the Family Friends program has changed. Over time, the METCO liaison to the PTA/PTO Presidents Council (and other parents) have observed that while scores may be increasing, some of the important social supports for students have changed. I have listened to Boston parents for 13 years and understand that people who register for METCO are excited to send their children to Lexington for the complete package of a Lexington education – not only the academic reputation, but also the opportunity to make life-long friends with children who live here, the chance to participate in social events after school, birthday parties, club sports, plays and other extracurricular activities.

Earlier this year, an LHS senior in the METCO program spoke to the School Committee and told us that while he appreciated the education he was receiving in Lexington, he still often felt he was on the outside looking in. As we move forward, I hope that we will balance our offerings and make sure that while we continue to support academic achievement, we also make our schools feel like a welcoming learning environment for all students.

9. *Lexington students come from a diverse community, with families of many backgrounds, with parents of varied professions, themselves schooled in different education systems from other US states or other countries. Parents have a range of expectations about how schools should be run, what constitutes student social/emotional wellness, and even what constitutes academic excellence and how it is measured.*

How will you, as a School Committee member, use community input as part of your decision making process?

My favorite part of elected office is hearing from community stakeholders and making certain that our decisions are informed by that input. I will continue to invite people to share their experiences with our school system, whether we are in a meeting or in a parking lot, by email or by phone. I will also continue to advocate passionately so that all my constituents' voices are heard.

My experience as a parent of two children in the system came at a time when our schools were expanding along a diversity scale. We have school friends with so many different heritages and cultural backgrounds – from China, India, Europe, Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, South America, Africa, and all over the U.S., including multi-generational Lexingtonians. Cultural views and international experience range widely when it comes to defining a quality education.

While I encourage input at meetings, hearings and informal meetings, I know there are hurdles for people who are new to Lexington, and new to America. Language and cultural differences can be a barrier to participation. I make a special effort to help overcome those barriers because I think of the

experiences my great-grandparents shared with me, about when they first moved to America and did not speak the language or understand the public school system. I believe we also need to allocate more time for professional development and parent-teacher association workshops to improve our community's collective skills in cultural sensitivity, anti-bias and anti-racism practices.

We once participated in cultural proficiency training on a system-wide basis. I remember when my daughter's kindergarten teacher shared the powerful lessons she learned in a required professional development class. She had to find a place to be where she would be the only white person for a stretch of eight hours and observe how she felt. This is only one simple assignment, but one that was incredibly powerful for her. She brought a new perspective back to her classroom and her work with parents: recognition that she might need to work to be even more welcoming. In our current system the vast majority of teachers, staff and elected officials are Caucasians whose families have lived in America for multiple generations, while a large percentage of students are not. I believe we all try to be sensitive, but we improve by learning, and we can do better.

10. Over the last year, can you describe one issue which the School Committee handled very effectively? And one issue that could have been addressed better?

If I were giving the School Committee a report card letter grade, I would give us an A+ in hiring the new superintendent. In early spring 2014, five sitting members of the School Committee learned that Dr. Ash was going to retire. We agreed to seek an outside consultant to help guide the hiring process for the next superintendent. We worked in open meetings (with assistance from Mary Ellen Dunn) to develop a Request For Proposals (RFP). We then conducted public interviews for the finalist firms and unanimously selected Hazard, Young, Attea and Associates (HYA).

One member of the School Committee moved to the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the remaining four members worked harmoniously to continue our process. Working with HYA, we created many opportunities for all stakeholders to share their views on the skills and characteristics that would be most desirable in the next superintendent. We supported more than 20 focus groups, 2 community forums and a town-wide survey to gather feedback. We next included a public presentation of HYA's recommended Leadership Profile, allowing for further feedback. I regularly heard from people in different groups (parents, staff, community members) that they felt the Leadership Profile resonated with their sense of our needs.

Simultaneously, the School Committee established an open process to invite interested community members to apply for a seat on our Search Committee. We unanimously selected members and I was very honored to serve as a Co-Chair. The eleven member Search Committee worked together incredibly well and included a wonderful cross-section of constituent groups (union president, parent representative, special education specialist, former finance committee member, principal). Together, the search committee reached unanimous agreement on a slate of finalists.

Finalists were presented to the full School Committee, which had grown back to five members in November. We readily incorporated our newest member so everyone could contribute to the next stage in our process. We held formal interviews in open meeting for each finalist, and it was an exciting meeting when we gathered at the end of the week to learn that we all had the same preferred candidate.

This process brought our committee and our community together. We demonstrated that we could do something very difficult in a transparent and inclusive manner. Our experience will help us as we move forward transitioning the new superintendent to Lexington. Even now, we are working together to plan Dr. Czajkowski's welcome.

An issue we could have handled better was our transition to the state's new superintendent evaluation process. To me, evaluating the superintendent is a critical component of providing the ongoing and meaningful support that will help him/her succeed and, in turn, help our system flourish.

Since my election, I have worked very hard to establish an annual and transparent superintendent evaluation process that would include feedback from a range of stakeholders. I advocated to restore the 360 degree approach to gather feedback from all constituents. This was something less comfortable for some individual members, but I think we did a good job moving toward a process that gathered impressions from teachers, administrators, community members and parents. There are many aspects of a superintendent's work that are not visible to School Committee members, and for which we need evidence from those s/he supervises.

Last year, we agreed with the superintendent to administer the state's new evaluation system for superintendents. While I appreciate that we were new to the process, I think we should have taken more time to work with an expert to guide us through the first year. As a School Committee, we all supported the expense and time required to train supervisors and support teachers while they began the state's new evaluation system for teachers. We simply needed to do the same for ourselves. Without this guidance, we arrived at the end of the year and learned that we had not identified appropriate evidence to evaluate the superintendent under the agreed-upon standards. Anecdotal evidence is important, but we have moved toward data-driven decision-making and should have agreed in advance on some key metrics.

We made it through the first year, or I hope we will have by Tuesday January 10th, but our process was not timely, lacked a method to gather feedback from all constituents, and I believe we lost some strengths from our former process. Moving forward, I would like to see us establish a working group to focus on this, get better training and bring it back to benefit the full School Committee, and then meet with the superintendent quarterly to support his/her progress, and find a way to bring in feedback from others besides the superintendent. If re-elected, I am committed to help the committee do a better job next year.

All candidates are asked to limit the response to each question to at most two or three paragraphs, and to provide the questionnaire responses by Saturday, Feb 7th, 2015. Responses will not be edited, and will run as submitted. They will be posted on lex-wiki.org in PDF format and announced through other town media. Questionnaire coordinator: Andrei Radulescu-Banu (bitdribble@gmail.com, 617-216-8509).
