



# Lexington Public Schools

146 Maple Street ♦ Lexington, Massachusetts 02420

Paul B. Ash, Ph.D.  
*Superintendent of Schools*

(781) 861-2580  
email: [pash@sch.ci.lexington.ma.us](mailto:pash@sch.ci.lexington.ma.us)  
fax: (781) 863-5829

## Our Schools

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*Natalie Cohen, Principal, Lexington High School*

A few weeks ago, Lexington High School received notice of its reaccreditation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). The process of accreditation offers the opportunity for systematic and continuous school improvement. My recent arrival at LHS fortuitously coincided with the publication of our accreditation report, a convergence of events that has given us the impetus to celebrate and sustain our impressive strengths, underscored by NEASC's numerous commendations, as well as to reflect and focus on areas for growth, described in NEASC's recommendations.

Accreditation by NEASC relies on a voluntary, peer review process. Schools begin the 10-year cycle by undertaking an 18-month self-study, in Lexington's case initiated in 2005. During that time faculty members work collaboratively to develop a mission statement, academic, social and civic expectations, and school-wide rubrics. During the following year, for us 2006-2007, faculty members work in committees to draft reports in seven areas: mission, curriculum, instruction, assessment, leadership and organization, school resources, and community resources. The next year, for LHS 2007-2008, the faculty fine-tunes the numerous self-study reports; collects and organizes samples of student work; and prepares for the NEASC 17-member visiting team's 3-day visit, which occurred in May 2008.

NEASC's accreditation is dependent on a commitment to comprehensive high standards, focusing on virtually every aspect of a school's operation. As NEASC self-describes, these standards are "often accepted in substitution for minimal standards set by state departments of education. Standards are reviewed periodically (generally every five years) and are interconnected (e.g., school curriculum and student assessment), reflecting the voluntary, independent nature of accreditation combined with recognition of pertinent state and federal regulations." NEASC Executive Director/CEO Jacob Ludes III has written, "The accreditation process we have developed over the years is a major vehicle that can and should be used to bring about educational improvement at all levels of schooling. NEASC is poised to be a partner in the effort to reform and improve education in the region."

Active, invested participants in this process, LHS faculty members have read the recently published report and have initiated steps to sustain commended practices. These commended areas include, among others: the level of rigor in AP, Honors, and Level 1 courses; the use of the Mission Statement to guide decisions regarding grading practices and professional learning communities (PLCs); our recognition and response to the unhealthy impact of stress; our acknowledgement of the Achievement Gap; the efforts and contributions of parent support organizations; and the quality of the Mission Statement; Academic, Social and Civic Expectations; and School-wide Rubrics.

With the very useful and specific input of our self-study work as well as the NEASC Accreditation Report, we are now working in small professional learning communities, in follow-up committees, and in faculty-wide initiatives, embracing this opportunity for growth and change. As Jim Collins posits in *Good to Great*, “This is the magical combination of ‘preserve the core and stimulate progress.’” Major themes of the areas of improvement are: expanding and improving professional development around best practices; continuing to implement, refine, and align course-specific learning expectations with school-wide rubrics; and expanding and improving technology. Many initiatives have already been undertaken. Every faculty member is a member of at least one professional learning community that meets weekly in an established common planning time. Much faculty meeting time has been dedicated to small, interdisciplinary study groups addressing focused areas of concern (social and civic expectations, classroom best practices, and engaging all students to enhance student learning). Work has begun on integrating school-wide rubrics with course-specific grading standards, as well as integrating processes to communicate individual student progress in meeting school-wide expectations.

The energy of the Lexington High School faculty is awe-inspiring. I am impressed daily with their thoughtfulness, their insights, and their individual and collective commitments to enhancing student learning. Their open-mindedness, team-orientation and productivity are inspirational. I am proud to work among them to improve the learning experiences of the students at Lexington High School.