



THEORY OF CHANGE:

Lexington High School graduation requirements need to be updated with the help of all members of the community. Therefore the community needs to feel welcomed, engaged and empowered to do the work. This will ensure buy-in and will set the stage for further engagement.

LOCAL CONTEXT AND MY ROLE:

Lexington is a high performing school district (LPS) with students' outcomes routinely a few grades above nationwide peers⁽¹⁾. It is in an affluent historic neighborhood with about thirty three thousand residents⁽²⁾ with a median household income of about \$186 thousand. The public schools enroll seven thousand students of which approximately 250 students are from METCO (Boston based residents). There are about 2300 students in the high school which is due for either a complete rebuild or significant renovations. I am currently serving a second term as a School Committee member. This report will be shared with my colleagues, Superintendent and Central Administration.

The schools have had a decade of significant enrollment growth. The town population is 29% foreign born residents predominantly from Asia⁽³⁾. Therefore about one third of the population speaks a language other than English at home, as is the trend in Massachusetts⁽⁴⁾ (see below). Our English Language learners are at about 8%. The student body is changing ethnically due to

in migration of Asian American families attracted by the school and family-friendly town reputation.

	2021	2021	2019-20	2019-20	2018-19	2018-19	2017-2018	2017-2018	2016-17	2016-17
Race	% of District	% of State	% of District	% of State	% of District	% of State	% of District	% of State	% of District	% of State
African American	3.9	9.3	3.8	9.2	4	9.2	4	9	4.1	8.9
Asian	41.8	7.2	40.7	7.1	39.3	7	38.1	6.9	37.2	6.7
Hispanic	4.8	22.3	4.4	21.6	4	20.8	3.4	20	3.3	19.4
Native American	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.2
White	42.2	56.7	44	57.9	45.9	59	48	60.1	49.7	61.3
Native Hawaiian, Pac	0	0.1	0	0.1	0	0.1	0	0.1	0	0.1
Multi-Race, Non-Hisp	7.3	4.1	7	3.9	6.8	3.8	6.4	3.6	5.7	3.4

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Meanwhile our school and town staff continue to be majority white though much effort is underway to hire diversity. Out of 1157 Lexington Public Schools staff, we have 33 African American, 35 Hispanic and 56 Asian American educators, which is roughly 10% ⁽⁵⁾. Lexington has hired a Director of Student Equity and Supports, and the town is in the process of hiring an equity officer.

The need and timing:

The pandemic has exacerbated an existing problem which is our aging high school. The building was built in 1950 for a much smaller population of students. Its crowded spaces and aging HVAC system are inadequate. The process to rebuild/renovate is in its initial stages as we look to the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) to approve our project.

Similarly, Lexington High School's (LHS) current graduation requirements⁽⁶⁾ too have not been updated for many years. Graduation is the culminating measurement of a pre-K to 12 education. At present the requirements lacks coherence with the new strategic plan crafted in 2019. The LHS requirements surpass the Massachusetts' Department of Secondary and Elementary Education (DESE) requirements⁽⁷⁾. There is some concern that they lay an undue burden on students even though the graduation rate is 98%.

The Covid pandemic and the resultant harm to our students' education and mental health is of paramount concern to the community within Lexington and beyond. There is a renewed desire to preserve the academic rigor and support struggling learners. Any change to these requirements would have ripple effects throughout the system due to curriculum changes and new expectations.

The required re-imagining of the high school in its physical and aspirational aspects should be a community effort. In order to do this well and create a foundation for the next decade it is important to engage the past, present and future school communities in its re-authoring to the fullest extent possible.

The school - minded Lexington community (lifecycle of a school volunteer):

Lexington is fortunate to have a very engaged community who take pride in its school system. It has multiple local groups formed around ethnicity or cultural similarities such as the Chinese American Association of Lexington (CAAL), the Korean Americans of Lexington (KoLex), the Indian Americans of Lexington (IAL) and the Association of Black Citizens of Lexington (ABCL). These groups are very active and organize town wide events annually such as a Lunar New Year celebration, Diwali celebration and Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Remembrance and Service.

Schools tend to be the training grounds for volunteering and engagement for residents. Parents volunteer in the classroom, coach sports and take on leadership roles in parent teacher organizations (PTOs), and site councils etc. Having a highly educated and diverse parent community brings enormous expertise and culture into the classroom which could not be hired on any school budget. For example: I have volunteered with a pediatrician, lawyer, chartered accountant, computer scientist, HGSE Alumni, violin virtuoso, fashion designer, ceramic artist, authoress, and marathon runner! These 'off balance sheet' assets immeasurably enriched the learning experiences of the students. Many caregivers strive for school-like families and for LPS creating family-like schools is a goal within reach.

Given that schools provide the first opportunity for many young parents to become involved, form friendships, and take on leadership responsibilities, it is important that all incoming parents should feel equally welcome. (See the table for common engagement opportunities). These will not only translate into beneficial outcomes for their own children's education but leverage the talents of such parents to help all children in the class.

However, for an immigrant parent the commonplace may seem bewildering, and a language barrier can add an intimidating complexity to daily life. Taking a more active role in the schools is only possible if there are others of the same community, who are already engaged and scaffold the participation; or the school administration makes a determined effort; or there is an adverse event which forces the issue.

Table: Existing family engagement opportunities:

- Elementary schools
 - Class based volunteering as room parent, chaperon on field trips, organizers of classroom celebrations, audience for classroom events
- Middle Schools
 - Volunteers and chaperons for international trips
- High School
 - Volunteers for graduation, college counseling events
 - Parent groups around specific years (Junior and Senior) supporting certain clubs
- Common; District level
 - Site council, after school club coaching etc.
 - Teacher parent conferences

- o PTA, PTO sponsored family events
- o Audience at sports, theater, music and other school productions
- o Annual Parent Academy (Health, wellness and other topics of community interest)
- o Sports coaches, promoter clubs, after school clubs organizers and volunteers

Volunteering for district level committees

- As needed (our covid testing program is volunteer driven).
- Tax override campaign organizers and volunteers (very important for school construction projects).

Fortunately, some parents just need a gentle push. While serving as the PTO co-chair at one elementary school, I noticed that attendance at an annual multicultural potluck was lackluster. The same families attended every year. However, the evidence in the playground pointed to a diverse student population. Next year, I preemptively did some personal outreach to parents of different ethnicities, requesting cultural representation. The simple ask was enough for hitherto non engaged families to feel 'invited in'. We had a widely successful event with families arriving in their traditional clothing with big bowls of their cuisine to share, along with activities for all children and performances.

Engagement in older grades:

Parent involvement becomes more circumscribed in the middle school and more so in the high school as students are encouraged to develop autonomy and parents discouraged from classroom volunteering. However, the Lexington parents continue to volunteer in school focused groups that provide funds, do outreach or organize events for staff and students. These again add to the overall school experience while building community and creating a network of invested adults outside of the school.

As the students age and schools request less hands on involvement, such uber volunteering parents find an outlet in town focused committees or rekindle careers. Despite the number of parents who choose the latter option, there are enough who are happy to volunteer and maintain their social networks through the town committees. And of course there is a group of retirees who join in enthusiastically as well. These tend to be white. Through some concentrated efforts racial diversity is taking hold⁽⁸⁾. Volunteers of color for town based committees tend to be predominantly Indian Americans, which may be a function of their ease with the English Language and the path breaking efforts of a few 'elders' in the community. Learning from the successful Indian American modus operandi other groups have begun to energize their members to take part in town governance. Our African American community (a very small percentage of our total population) is slowly gaining traction with some representation too.

School and town leadership can also determine parent engagement. We have had three superintendents in the past decade. The first two ‘retired’ as the community was not happy with their ability to communicate. The third has written the book on community and board relationships⁽⁹⁾. She regularly sends out district wide communications, major initiatives are undertaken through CITs (Community Input Teams), and when possible, multiple public forms are held to allow for feedback. Critical communication pieces are translated into many languages (sometimes with hilarious results, especially for Hindi, but the efforts are much appreciated).

Who speaks?

In the past three years we have undertaken three major efforts which required public forums where parents could freely give us feedback on proposed policy changes (late start times for high school, redistricting, and the pandemic). In addition to the public forums, the parent community is able to reach us through emails and by using designated times during School Community meetings for public comment. As a keen observer as to who reaches out to us, I can safely say that the feedback came predominantly from our white parents. As these policy changes were far reaching in their impact it was concerning that we were not hearing diverse feedback. At the very least I hoped the feedback would be in some proportion to our student population ethnicities. The minority voices were not missing entirely but tended to be muted.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE FAMILY SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP PROPOSAL:

Primary goals:

- Rewrite the LHS graduation requirements in collaboration with Lexington student, caregiver and town community.
- Engage a large section of all school community groups (ethnicity, English language learners, METCO, economics, geographic locations etc.)
- Build trust relationships with engaged groups.
- Increase, encourage & enable wider feedback participation (numbers and extent) on the draft requirements.
- Ensure that the final version is well understood and is acceptable.

Secondary goals

- School staff will gain a more complete understanding of the community and how to engage them.
- Increased family participation and familiarity with engagement processes will improve individual student outcomes and school-community ties.
- Community training and development as parents of today become municipal volunteers and elected officials of tomorrow.

Tertiary goal:

- Lexington is looking to rebuild its high school within the next 5 years. It will be very expensive and disruptive for the student population and town. Increasing engagement now will ensure a smoother, successful process.
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PROPOSED ACTIONS TO ACHIEVE THE GOALS:

Gather data on requirements:

- Data analysis to learn which groups of students are struggling with current graduation requirements and why.
- Literature analysis to identify graduation requirements in like school districts and best practices.
- Survey current and past students' caregivers to ascertain feedback on requirements, and ideal high school engagement for parents.
- Survey students, alumni.
- Gather input from college counselors and university admissions officers (especially from colleges who enroll the bulk of our students such as UMass, BU and Brandeis).
- Share collected and analyzed data with school and town community in multiple languages through multiple channels.

Gather data on community and form task force:

- Data analysis to ascertain current volunteering in LPS.
- Identify sections of parent-caregiver and town community beyond currently established groups who volunteer.
- Contact established groups for contact information (friend recommending a friend).
- Reach out to identified individuals requesting participation in a district wide effort, with clearly explained time and effort required as well as language supports available.
- Reach out to all community members for volunteers to form a task force.
- Form a diverse core team as task force, and an extended team who provide feedback on drafts prior to communication to district.
- Communicate goals, timeline, deliverables and feedback mechanisms for project to all.
- Establish evaluation metrics for process beyond just the deliverable (the new graduation requirements).

Engage task force:

- Hold meet and greets (either virtually or in person) to get to know volunteers who sign up and to explain the graduation requirements effort.
- Do the work which may require multiple small and large group meetings.
- Utilize the feedback loop with the larger community using the draft requirements.
- Repeat process till final version.
- Create relationships with task force groups/individuals through mechanisms for including these individuals-community sections on an ongoing basis.
- Ensure that there are funds in the budget (translation services, community events, etc.)

Effective practice strategies currently used, and existing factors for successful implementation:

- Some established level of trust with community.
- Community supportive of schools and mostly eager to volunteer.
- Community engaged and interested in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion work.
- School and municipal administration on board for more engagement and already putting it into practice.
- Outreach through school, PTO/PTA newsletters, and central office emails
- Websites for school, PTO/PTA, clubs etc.
- Reliance on students conveying information home especially in older grades.
- Competent Central Office staff and largely cordial relationships between administration, unions and staff.

The anticipated challenges:

- Very little data on family engagement for our ELL population.
- Current survey response rate is about 30% on matters that effect every student. How to increase that?
- Some animosity in community because of Covid and required online learning.
- Pandemic fatigue in staff – why does this need to be done now? Therefore timing of this effort. District staff are grappling with return to in person school, assessing and bridging the ‘Covid slide’, and trying to re-engage students after a long gap of in person schooling.
- Community Covid fatigue, as many may want to focus on jobs, and are not ready for more change.
- Most volunteers tend to be white, should we turn away the ready help, while searching for others?
- Any legal ramifications of requiring a certain ethnic mix in the task force?
- Natural ongoing reticence, given animus against Asians nationally. Some groups may be leery of taking on too much of a prominent role, or not have the time to devote to such efforts or not feel confident or welcomed enough to engage.
- Balancing outreach with over communication to parents.
- Funds for translation work given our budget freeze.

Mitigation strategies:

- Delay the work till post Covid education has become routine.
 - Delay the work on graduation requirements to coincide with the high school construction feasibility study, which is in turn dependent on MSBA decision.
 - Share data with school based staff and community leadership on current family engagement.
 - Create class and school based engagement opportunities for issues of more immediate concern. This will help coach reluctant parents in taking part in district wide efforts.
 - Create initial communications which invite correspondence and not force it.
 - Expanding the timeline of the project because of the necessary family engagement piece.
 - Meetings with participants to understand process improvements, desired changes.
 - Create a website or communication hub
 - Look for public private partnerships for expertise and funds to do this work (stipends for staff, printing costs for materials, translation costs etc.).
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Evaluation and measurements:

- Survey response rates and ethnic mix of responses.
 - Feedback from participants and staff's response rates to feedback
 - Monitor traffic on website
 - Project timeline and deliverables being met.
 - Quantity and ethnicity of participants. (Is it the same group all the time?)
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BRONFENBRENNER FRAMEWORK AS GUIDE:

As it has become clear in this report that even for a simple task many factors have to be considered. Family, economy, legalities, political structures and environmental factors all can affect the outcomes.

The Bronfenbrenner framework has been used to ensure that all facets are evaluated for their impact. At the Microsystem level, it is imperative that current students and alumni are able to weigh in on their experiences in school with the academic load; and the hopes, aspirations and concerns of their parents are taken into account. Education is a path to economic stability especially for the immigrant community. They have figured out a way to excel which usually requires whole-hearted commitment to academic goals with a focus on college. Changing graduation requirements may generate uncertainty and anxiety (Macrosystem concern). In addition, special attention needs to be paid to include the parent community of the grades who will graduate within five years of the new graduation requirements being instituted.

At the Mesosystem level, groups that provide engagement opportunities through afterschool clubs and sports (play), community service (religious and secular), and local employers can help define desired attributes of the high school student which flow into the requirements. Therefore they have been included as a source of desired volunteers.

At the Exosystem level, we have to be mindful of what we are asking of our parent and student community. The past year and a half has been a period of political and social upheaval exacerbated by once in a century disease. Many economic sectors have been harmed from small retail operations to multinational corporations ⁽¹⁰⁾. Some of the families have contracted Covid, and some of the Asian Americans may have lost a loved one in their extended families. The anti-immigrant national rhetoric of the past president and the visible cracks in the rule of law on January 6th has created distrust and wariness. Now may not be the time to bring about more change with or without community involvement. Whether the community is ready will have to be investigated prior to starting the work.

CONCLUSION:

Engaging our changing school student and family demographic will not be an easy task. However it is a necessary and desired part of the process if we are to serve the needs of all our students. Lexington has an interesting mix of parents from uber volunteers to wary bystanders. Ideally all should feel welcome to participate to the extent they desire in their children's education. They all have equal right to shape the next decade and more of the Lexington Public Schools.

***Please note:** Our special education and African American populations have not been discussed as that deserves its own report.*

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