

LHS Graduation Requirements - a Perspective

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With assistance from a friend. Some documents sourced from staff presentations or DESE.

Published: December 1st, 2023

Executive Summary:

In the [2019-2029 Lexington Public Schools Strategic Plan](#), the district embarked on ambitious goals, including Goal 2: Redefine Success. Lexington has been a historically high-achieving district. However, it is imperative to go beyond the traditional definition of success in terms of solely academic achievement. The hope is that LHS graduates will be equipped with social-emotional and critical thinking skills which will set them up well for healthy, productive and happy lives. Most LHS graduates will, in all probability, initially study and live in the US. Certain economic factors will be their reality. Therefore, it is important to consider what success will mean for students after graduation.

It can be hoped that the average LHS graduate is gainfully employed and able to afford healthcare and rental payments (basic health and housing needs) after 4-5 years post high school. In addition, LHS graduates should be able to get a college education as inexpensively as possible if they so desire. Some graduates choose to serve in the armed forces, take gap years or work.

Approximately 90% of Lexington High School Graduates attend a four-year college or university after graduation ([source](#)). As has been widely documented, the cost of a college education is becoming more and more expensive for most Americans ([source](#)). Applying for financial aid is an onerous process requiring paperwork which may be difficult for non native speakers to navigate. In order to analyze how graduates could obtain this post-secondary education as inexpensively as possible, the UMass Amherst admissions criteria and fees were examined. An examination of what it takes to get into UMass Amherst, the AP tests they accept, and the potential undergraduate tuition savings for those testing out of a particular class are linked [here](#). These tuition savings, based on AP test performance, may also be applied at select private colleges as well. (A welcome trend is that community college has become more accessible with recent aid programs in Massachusetts.)

[MassCore](#), which was created in 2007 and amended in 2018, is a state-recommended high school program of studies (i.e., graduation) requirement for success in post-secondary education and the workforce. Districts are allowed to set additional requirements for graduation and students are also encouraged to take more rigorous courses and engage in additional learning experiences ([source](#)). Many neighboring districts with similar resources to Lexington have graduation requirements above the MassCore requirements in order to best prepare their

students for college and career readiness. MassCore is a desired baseline recommended by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for all the districts in Massachusetts. In Lexington, the goals and aspirations have been higher.

Currently, Lexington High School has graduation requirements that exceed the “recommendations” from the state (which equate to 96 credits at LHS). LHS students are required to earn 104 credits, including but not limited to four years of English, Social Studies, Math, and Science along with 40 hours of community service ([source](#)). This is not significantly higher than MassCore, and is similar to many neighboring districts which exceed 100 credits ([source](#)).

There has been discussion about reducing graduation requirements closer to the MassCore requirements. This is being considered for two primary reasons. First, there are concerns around whether the current requirements are too restrictive and prevent certain student subgroups (e.g., SPED, ELL, transfer ins, those who have a medical issue, etc.) from succeeding and occasionally from fulfilling graduation requirements. Second, there is a desire for more student agency and to foster more authentic learning experiences for students beyond their traditional LHS coursework. This could include internships, dual enrollment, etc. to better align with students interests and long-term ambitions.

However, there are a few important arguments to consider for maintaining the academic standards and graduation requirements at LHS that can best prepare our graduates for lifelong success.

First, as previously mentioned, the majority of LHS graduates are attending a four-year college or university after graduation. College admissions are incredibly competitive, and opaque for the average student. Lexington’s educational program helps students be successful in their admissions process and onward educational journey. In addition, students can earn college credit and reduce the high costs of their education by taking AP classes and achieving a high enough score (often a 3 or higher out of 5). . This becomes even more compelling when coupled with the fact that on average 93% of LHS students have scored a 3 or higher on AP tests, which is tied for the second highest amongst neighboring districts over that period ([source](#)).

Second, internships and high school pathways are an interesting concept, though they can be incredibly hard to execute. This requires partnerships with higher education institutions, local businesses that are willing and capable of bringing in interns that are still classified as minors by the state, transportation for those that do not have their own rides/cars, as well as oversight capabilities by LHS to ensure that the internship is meeting the school’s goals while providing the optimal learning experience for the student. This does not mean these changes are impossible. Rather, they may require more planning and perhaps a pilot to determine if these are feasible and are considered a success for staff, students, and the community partners that would be offering these internship and dual enrollment opportunities.

Third, the equity argument is important for students that are struggling to meet the current requirements. The students may be struggling for various reasons (e.g., medical concerns, language, or they have recently moved into town). Each of these struggles requires a different approach to help these students graduate (e.g., academic, social-emotional, etc.). LHS may need to designate alternative graduation pathways, with flexibility enshrined in order to make students successful. A review of past student data would be very helpful in designing these alternative graduation pathways, along with input from LHS staff and parents. It is important to reiterate that it would be possible to both design these alternative graduation pathways/requirements for students that are struggling and maintain the rigorous academic opportunities that set up the vast majority of students to be successful in college and their careers; one does not come at the expense of the other.

Fourth, the LPS education is known for its excellence and the student body which routinely excels in academics, life skills, fine arts, sports, and community engagement. This commitment to excellence is part of the LHS brand and creates a broader appeal to the community for new residents. It ensures that the real estate market continues to grow as young families move in with the hope of attaining similar levels of success. The growing real estate market and taxes help fund the schools. These funds allow Lexington to pursue large capital projects such as the proposed new high school, and municipal renovations. Based on recent demographic trends, many of the families moving in tend to be of Asian descent, with a considerable portion of them being new immigrants. While some may be coming from affluent backgrounds, others are stretching to afford large mortgages. They make the economic and emotional investment because of the quality of the education and opportunities that Lexington offers them. Another observed phenomenon would be the households selling and moving out of town once their children graduate. For many, they are unable to afford the additional cost of their children's college education while living in Lexington. As the tax rate increases to accommodate for the new debt of the high school project, one way to return economic benefit is by reducing the cost of a college education for families. As mentioned before, this can be done by increasing access to AP courses where students can receive credit and save on tuition costs.

Every LHS student has the right to a phenomenal education, the foundation for which is laid throughout the entirety of the students' career at LPS. Vertical alignment is critical, as it is important to review and improve where possible the curriculum, instruction, assessment, and support provided to students from kindergarten to high school to ensure smooth transitions between grades and schools.

Foundational years build the students' identity as learners where they can begin to exemplify our mission of, "joy in learning; curiosity in life; and compassion in all we do." Therefore, the graduation requirements need to be anchored in a deep understanding of why students are struggling, especially if there are trends discernable longitudinally and within particular student subgroups. In high school, with the challenges and expectations of impending adulthood, foundational gaps become that much more difficult to overcome. Setting up students for success and providing the appropriate interventions and supports will be critical to ensuring

all students can exceed the rigorous graduation requirements that will set them up for lifelong success.

Updating graduation requirements requires us to look ahead to the future and look back at our prior successes. Looking ahead allows us to identify opportunities and challenges which come at an ever faster pace of change. For example, the impact of AI in all aspects of human endeavor and how this can be incorporated into our students' learning in a prudent way. Looking back provides us the opportunity to see how our graduates have fared, either in aggregate or individually.

Recently, LPS was proud to count amongst its graduates Carolyn Bertozzi who received the 2022 Nobel Prize in [Chemistry](#), and Drew Weissman who received the 2023 Nobel Prize in [Medicine](#). If viewed from a more recent focus, college graduation data is likely available for our students and additional analyses could show how they fared both in college and after graduation. This would also show us whether graduates can meet the previously stated goal of being gainfully employed and being able to afford healthcare and rental payments (basic health and housing needs) after 4 years out of high school, given that the majority of our students do attend 2-4 year colleges. Some of this analysis has likely been done already, and it would be helpful to continue to build this longitudinal data to continually evaluate and update graduation requirements and curriculum as necessary.

In closing, it is important to consider the external context surrounding our graduates. While there are many outcomes and qualities LPS wants for our graduates, there are two main goals: one aspirational and one more pragmatic.

Aspirationally, it is to have lifelong learners that can think critically and pursue what makes them happy. The LHS education is and can continue to achieve this goal, though there is some tension regarding the amount of STEM courses and AP's offered at LHS compared to the humanities, as voiced by our own recent graduates ([source](#)). This does warrant further discussion as to what courses are offered and how students can excel in areas beyond STEM at LHS.

However, when shifting to a larger national perspective, it can be important to have a strong foundation in STEM particularly when considering job prospects ([source](#)) and the growth sectors of the US economy. The LHS academic foundation allows our graduates to be prepared for life after high school. The rapid impact of generative AI on our world is just one technological trend of the many in the last decade which requires a retooling of skills and knowledge in the workplace. For the graduates' long-term success, a comfort level with STEM is important.

Pragmatically, it is about making sure that there are not excessive financial pressures and burdens placed upon them after high school. Being able to have a job that can meet the basic needs of housing and healthcare within approximately 4 years of graduation is paramount. It is important to consider the job market ([source](#)) and median income ([source](#)) to see how the world that LHS graduates will be walking into, as well as the degree to which their post graduate

pursuits assure they can cover housing costs ([source](#)) along with healthcare. By setting graduates up for success upon graduation, it is possible to ensure that both the aspirational and pragmatic goals are met. Maintaining the academic rigor of our graduation requirements, while adopting alternative graduation pathways and/or requirements for struggling students can ensure that all students thrive and are best prepared for a life of happiness and success after LHS.

Articles added:

Washington Post

“How Americans define a middle-class lifestyle — and why they can’t reach it”

By [Alyssa Fowers](#), [Emily Guskin](#) and [Scott Clement](#)

February 15, 2024

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2024/02/15/middle-class-financial-security/>

March 13th 2024

<https://bostonchamber.com/press-release/chamber-foundations-young-residents-survey-highlights-importance-of-housing-jobs-to-retention-of-20-30-year-olds/>