

LEXINGTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
Tuesday, June 2, 2015
Lexington School Department, Central Office, 146 Maple Street

PRESENT: Superintendent Dr. Paul Ash, Chair Jessie Steigerwald, Vice Chair William Hurley, Judith Crocker, Margaret Coppe, Abby Schwartz – Student Representative
Member Absent: Alessandro Alessandrini

Participants:

School Committee, Selectmen, School Staff, Town Staff, Community Based Organization Representatives, PTA/PTO Representatives, related Youth Serving Organizations/individuals

Also present: Andy Beck, School and Main Institute, Bettina McGimsey – PPC, Norm Cohen – Selectman, Leslie Zales, Denise Dracup, Kristie Demirer – Human Services, Charlotte Rodgers – Youth Services, Suzie Barry – Selectman, Jen Forgit – Cary Memorial Library, Bill Blout – Ad Hoc Committee, Mike McLean, Eileen Jay, Carol Pilarski, Manjula Karamcheti, Kathleen Lenihan, Val Viscosi, Christina Lin

The Minutes were taken by Julia Steigerwald Schnall.
The meeting convened at 3:35 pm.

Call to order and welcome: Chair Jessie Steigerwald called the meeting to order at 3:35 p.m., and introduced committee members. Norm Cohen, Selectman, introduced himself and introduced the issue of student stress and local policy. Bettina McGimsey introduced herself and her role with the PPC (PTA/PTO Presidents Council). Steigerwald noted that the Youth Risk Survey provides information to the School Committee but that in order to form goals it is helpful to have wider feedback and discussion. Steigerwald introduced Andy Beck from School and Main Institute and Manjula Karamcheti.

Agenda:

Welcome & Setting the Stage for the Day

Introductions:

Bill Blout introduced himself. Blout is a social worker and was on the Ad Hoc Committee for Youth at Risk. He shared that a goal would be to have open discussions – like this one – with representation from different groups who work with youth. Eileen Jay introduced herself as a parent of two children in the system. Jay was a member of the Ad Hoc Committee. She noted the need for serving Asian youth in particular and the goal to help those youth who in particular might flee when parents became involved. McGimsey was at the meeting as a representative of all the PTAs and PTOs in town and brought in a long list of goals she collected from those groups – she noted many of these goals had to do with academics and the balance of academic/extracurricular responsibilities.

Jen Forgit, Teen Programming Director at Cary Memorial Library – works with programming involving adults as well as children and teens.

Charlotte Rodgers, Human Services Director. Rodgers noted that Human Services works with residents of all ages around social services needs. She is very interested in how we identify, discuss and solve unmet needs in our community. How do we identify those unheard voices and how can we bring them forward?

Norman Cohen, Selectman: Cohen is interested in communication and how to let people know what services are available and what projects are happening. What is the role of government and what is the role of the parent?

Kristie Demirev – Human Services, Director of Youth and Family, is also facilitator of the Youth Services Council. Demirev hopes at the Community Center to create more programming for youths.

Denise Dracup – Social Worker. Dracup noted that she is the parent of a child who attended Lexington schools but did not graduate, and that she was in attendance the meeting as a concerned parent, hoping to reduce stigma.

Suzie Barry, Selectman: Barry introduced herself as parent of two children and echoed Cohen's hope for better communication and better collaboration, particularly between the Board and the community.

Abby Schwartz, SC Student Representative: Schwartz introduced herself and noted that from a student perspective there is some disillusionment with town government action to reduce stress. It feels like sometimes there are just words and no timely actions.

Mike McLean, LPD. McLean noted that currently the Police are seeking positive ways to interact with youth. They may first engage with youth during a challenging situation, even an arrest, and would like to build more positive introductions. He is hoping there are more opportunities in the future.

Carol Pilarski. Pilarski works closely with Eamonn Sheehan, Julie Fenn, Jennifer Wolfrum and they have sought to interpret the Youth Risk Survey results in order to communicate better with students. She expressed her hopes for better communication with alum, students, etc and to reduce the overlap of efforts to coordinate better as a community. The schools cannot solve these issues alone – nor can the Board of Selectmen – and Pilarski pointed out that better coordination is important in order to make progress.

Margaret Coppe, School Committee. Coppe expressed Alessandro Alessandrini's regrets that he could not be here today as he is at work. She shared the importance of building communication and coordination.

Bill Hurley, Vice Chair of the Lexington School Committee. Hurley has been a school psychologist and a superintendent. Hurley agreed that coordinated collaboration is very important considering the many branches of government represented in the room.

Judy Crocker, School Committee. Crocker expressed her interest in the Race to Nowhere and shared two examples. Some principals don't encourage walking to school during MCAS, which gave Crocker pause as the fresh air and movement could support students in what might be a stressful situation. Second, a slide in a recent administration presentation emphasized the importance of good test scores. Crocker noted that this emphasis may be feeding into a student stress problem. As a parent whose children went through the system, Crocker thought the community should add their voice to the issue of balancing academics and extra-curricular activities. She also wondered about the relationship between sleep deprivation and age-appropriate school start times, among other health-related studies.

Leslie Zales, Parent. Zales is on the Community Center Advisory Committee and also involved with the Community Endowment of Lexington. CEL supports nonprofits that are doing important things with youth in the town. One of the nonprofits founded last year was a program called Break the Silence about Relationship Violence. Zales noted there are several nonprofits doing important things and that it might be worthwhile to coordinate efforts based on what already exists in the community, and also raise awareness of what services exist for youth.

Paul Ash, Superintendent of Schools. Ash agreed that we need to do a better job communicating, coordinating, and collaborating. Ash also noted the importance of selecting shared goals to work toward. Ash wonders what the central problems are for the schools to solve, and also what is the responsibility of the town vs. parents.

Kathleen Lenihan: Lenihan is concerned highly about stress, particularly at the high school. Lenihan pointed out the importance of not teaching students to "manage stress" but to actively reduce stress. Zales commented that Laura Lasa seems to be on this same page based on her communications, and so finding the roots of this stress may require us to dig deeper.

Manjula Karamcheti – Asst. Director of Guidance for the schools and at LHS. Karamcheti was excited to be at the meeting and to see all these different departments at this meeting in one place discussing goals together, as many of these goals are not things that can be accomplished by one department alone.

Jessie Steigerwald, School Committee, listed a few specific goals: civic engagement, gathering student feedback to identify programs that are unsuccessful or take advantage of those that are. She noted student feedback that some stress-reduction efforts appeared surface and did not address prime student concerns around levels of homework, testing and time requirements for activities. Setting goals: she noted it tends to be difficult for to find appropriate balance to limit discussing concerns and actually set a few goals. She wants to promote social and emotional wellness. Line between school and community responsibility. Stress – sleep, self-harm, homework, impact of technology. Suicidal thoughts is an urgent concern given number of students who reported this on survey.

Val Viscosi, K12 Director for Guidance in LPS. Viscosi seconded Karamcheti's appreciation for seeing this diverse group of parents and administrators in one place, as coordination between groups remains highly important.

Christina Lin, Parent: Being a parent of two kids in the elementary and middle schools, hearing the discussions of student stress is interesting to her as the robustness of these small group discussions doesn't always result in immediate and strong action.

Context

Jessie Steigerwald

- Where we are
- What we are doing
- Why we are exploring a coalition process and shared goal setting

Steigerwald noted that over the past ten or 15 years, the School Committee through the school department has addressed concerns around youth in annual School Improvement Plans and most recently in the District Improvement Plan; with the municipal department, and community organizations, Lexington has programs and groups and departments all focused on making things better for children and youth. The Youth Risk Survey results don't indicate that we have met all our goals in making this the best place it can be for children. Steigerwald noted that Lenihan was among the community members who presented concerns to the School Committee and that their report led to creation of the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Youth at Risk as one part of a many-year effort to address these concerns. Steigerwald pointed out the Lexington Guidance Department's efforts with the tripod approach: school, municipal, community.

She then turned the floor over to Andy Beck to discuss his work. Is there some part of his work that we can apply to ourselves? Is there something we can gain from facilitated workshops or trainings? This is a community where lots of people need to come together to make a decision regarding whether to proceed with a shared goal.

Coalition Ideas

- Andy Beck, School & Main Institute – a view from the field
- Lexington ideas
- Other examples
- Let's revisit - what can we do together that we cannot do alone?

Andy Beck: I think all of you have addressed this need to coordinate, to collaborate, to cooperate. These are all very different things. The only reason to pull together a coalition is to figure out what you can do together that you couldn't do alone. We are currently the state TA providers. Two important initiatives: the high school dropout prevention initiative, and the Wraparound Initiative (in 6 urban districts, and related to addressing the nonacademic needs of students). He shared an African proverb about partnerships. (If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.)

Beck ran a PowerPoint – Developing Powerful Partnerships: Lexington Coalition Ideas.

Groups tend to be used to working separately. Creating a way to work together means integrating resource bases, looking at replication of service, etc. – more difficult than just saying we should have a meeting once a month.

Beck pointed out that coalitions can and should form different goals than individual groups. While departments might have their own branching goals, there are certain goals that should be set by coalitions that can only be accomplished together.

Beck listed a few Framing Thoughts that tend to show up in many different communities. Communities tend to be activity rich, yet systems poor. There tend to be many activities, programs, services, etc. but little systemic understanding of what we have to offer. There is never usually a director of coordination – so whose job is it to organize these groups? It is difficult to make the case for more money, programs, staff, etc. when we haven't connected what we already have.

He shared the story of a town that was trying to increase their college rate and decrease their dropout rate. When meeting with students in town, it became clear that several different branches in town were having students work on the same projects. This town had a lot of people taking action but not communicating with each other.

Karamcheti noted that this replication occurs in Lexington as well – and how powerful it would be if these conversations were coordinated around topics so that they could go deeper instead of repeating the same conversations.

Beck asked, why coordinate? Hurley responded: we need to be focused. McGimsey added, we all have different perspectives and ways of looking at the issue, and as a community we would benefit from sharing those perspectives. Schwartz proposed that maybe coordinating efforts would help more get through to the students than what is currently reaching the student body. Dracup echoed the importance of understanding different perspectives. Karamcheti pointed out the difference between adding another program, adding another department vs. having all the groups work together – the tripod approach – to coordinate change. Lenihan said frankly that doing it alone doesn't work. Jay noted that this problem of stress is a community-wide problem – and it can't be fixed by individuals, but only through a culture shift. Viscosi added that part of a coordination effort is making sure all the boats are going in the same direction to solve problems. Part of the consensus is making decisions about which groups are responsible for which pieces, and coordinating those efforts.

Beck asked, if this is such a good idea, why is this so hard? Crocker thinks there are too many cooks in the kitchen. Christine noted that while this group meets rather regularly, a culture shift isn't possible without the whole community getting on board. Steigerwald pointed out that there isn't that type of global coordination for the town at all – there is no global calendar, for example, so getting involved in new things is difficult. Barry proposed the fear of failure. Karamcheti noted also a lack of time. Dracup suggested the fear of change. Pilarski added that people tend to imagine things will happen much more quickly than they do, and there is a lack of patience/perseverance. Schwartz thinks there is a failure to think about what we might have to do to actually fix the problem – maybe in order to reduce suicide rates we might slip to being the #3 school in the state.

Beck acknowledged that coordination is not a skill that most people are trained in, and it cannot be an add-on to what already exists. He was concerned for Lexington as a community to see the

number of kids who thought about committing suicide. There are issues that are larger than departments can handle alone. Is the community ready to do things in a different way? There is no reason to come together and keep doing what has already been done; the only reason to come together in a coalition is because doing what we've already been doing isn't working.

Hurley said we need to expand our idea of what systemic means. We each have our own systems. Expanding to community-wide systems will be a big step.

Beck talked about the juvenile justice system. Working with a cross-systems approach is the only way to be effective – the probation offices, courts, law enforcement, lawyers, social workers need to work together to coordinate what steps they are taking.

Why do people want to work in coalitions?

- broad-based ownership of the need and its solution
- builds new muscles as a community – once “strong” can tackle a variety of deeper issues
- cost effective delivery of a certain functions/support
- integration of efforts – avoids duplication
 - o addressing gaps by redistributing the efforts that already exist
- leverage
- “one stop” shopping for youth and families
- sustainability – not going away if funding goes away

Beck asked, do you think a coalition makes sense here?

Pilarski thought it makes enormous sense. She asked Beck what he thinks the fundamental next steps would be to identify needs & to make this happen. Hurley thinks this is a problem for everyone to address. Steigerwald pointed out the importance of setting goals. If this group could come up with shared goals that would be a good starting point. Steigerwald asked if Lexington will be okay if we have fewer kids trying to commit suicide, and also lower MCAS scores. She thinks that would be a good goal. Schwartz doesn't think MCAS scores will be impacted. She thinks the important thing to do would be to decide on the importance of mental health to Lexington.

Beck asked if this group thinks meeting together as a community would be the best and most efficient way to solve this.

Zales wondered who the captain of that barge would be, if we all come together as one coalition. Beck said the quick answer is that you need multiple points of leadership.

Ash said this is a trick question. What needs to be answered first is, what is urgent? Ash pointed out that urgency is what tends to drive people to immediate action. To him, the number of students thinking about suicide is urgent. Communicating that urgency might get people moving.

Dracup thinks that instead of doing this from the top down, it might be worth doing some “ground work” to figure out how people might respond differently to this change. What are the

costs? How might this encourage more burnout in people? Dracup points out there needs to be readiness and willingness before this gets going.

McGimsey pointed out that from a community perspective, this group would definitely need to see more players in the room – from sports, from religious organizations – Rodgers echoed this concern. Rodgers also said she struggles with the idea of top-down organization. She’s not sure that she understands the implementation of coalitions in this sense.

Crocker thinks there will be a lot of organizational work necessary to figure out who all the stakeholders are, and then to have stakeholders organize their priorities. The group then needs to organize those priorities and break into working groups. If working groups can have representatives from multiple branches. Beck again noted that urgency will get people on board and that the “how” will be less complicated once people are on board.

Rodgers brought up the idea of stigma and making a powerful statement about Lexington. Beck noted, also, that we need people to behave differently, not just have different words. Beck said that when he went in to talk to his kids’ teachers, he was more worried about his kid learning to love learning than about learning to read and write. If the community can’t come together and agree with values in that way, we will have difficulty with coalition-forming.

Steigerwald paused the discussion with four minutes remaining and acknowledged that this discussion might feel repetitive to some. She expressed a wish that this group of people keep reaching out to other departments and bring them into discussions. She believes that setting a goal at some point – perhaps in the fall – is necessary in order to make progress.

Zales interjected to point out the importance of changing demographics in the community, and involving those groups.

Steigerwald proposed the last week of September as a time for a larger meeting with all the people brought in. (Do it after back-to-school nights, McGimsey asked).

Pilarski would like to have this type of effort coalescing advertised in some way. Beck would like everyone to slow down. Rodgers says Human Services may not be able to commit to being a co-host at this point. Christina asks how this will be planned out. Karamcheti thinks there may need to be coordination over the summer as to the agenda/etc for this September meeting. Ash says don’t use people’s fear of change as an excuse to avoid it. He says that if people can identify key issues that can only be solved as a group, we need to move forward with this meeting.

Cohen noted the importance of having the community aware that this coalition exists.

Rodgers thinks mid-July will be too busy because of the move to the Community Center.

Beck points out we don’t need to have everyone at the planning meeting.

June 16th was proposed as a date for the next (planning) meeting. The time was set for 3:30 p.m. and location would follow. Some people agreed to meet with Beck to debrief and prepare for the July 16th meeting. (McGimsey, Hurley, Steigerwald, Cohen, Barry)

At 5:10 p.m. Mr. Hurley moved to adjourn.

The motion was seconded by Ms. Crocker. The vote was 4:0 and the meeting adjourned.

Meeting Materials: Agenda

Voted Approved by the School Committee June 22, 2015