

**Improving Professional Relationships  
in the  
Lexington Public Schools  
March 12, 2012**



# Overview

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1. History and context
2. The study process
3. Staff demographics
4. Change drivers and change process
5. Three themes and recommendations
6. The road ahead



# History and Context

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Time of great change in public education internationally, nationally, in Massachusetts and in Lexington

- External economic, political and policy forces
- Internal forces resulting from district's history, leadership changes and working relationships among staff members
- Merging of external and internal forces driven by the ever-expanding knowledge base on teaching and learning and the organizational practices that support high levels of achievement for all learners



# History and Context

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The district is making a significant shift from a culture of teacher and building autonomy to a culture of collaboration. The resulting tensions are producing difficulties in organizational functions, affecting relationships and job satisfaction for many employees at all levels within the district.

The important task is to forge productive working relationships while maintaining the district's historic commitments to high levels of student learning for all learners across a rich and vibrant curriculum.



# Four Positive Messages

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1. A passion for teaching Lexington's students.
2. Pride in the outstanding academic performance of Lexington students.
3. Admiration and respect for the strength and expertise of colleagues.
4. Appreciation for the support for education and the arts by parents, the community and the Lexington Education foundation.

**KIDS, COLLEAGUES, COMMUNITY**



# The Steering Committee

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Dr. Paul Ash, Superintendent of Schools

Andrew Baker, English Teacher, LHS

Natalie Cohen, Principal, LHS

Meg Colella, Principal, Bridge School

Diane Corbett, Special Education Teacher, Diamond MS

Larry David, Social Studies Teacher, LHS

Dr. Steve Flynn, Principal, Clarke MS

David Lambert, Grade Four Teacher, Bridge School

Phyllis Neufield, President Lexington Education Association

Carol Pilarski, Assistant Superintendent of Schools



# Interview and Focus Group Process

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September 20, 2011 – October 27, 2011

Interviews and focus group participants numbered  $\pm$  350 employees

- Teachers PreK – 12
- Secretaries
- Student support instructors
- Student support personnel
- Instructional assistants
- Technology support staff
- Custodians
- Principals, Assistant principals, Department heads
- Central office administrators
- LEA executive board



# Data Interpretation Process

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November 14, 2011 - The steering committee met to sort and classify responses.

December 19, 2011 – The steering committee met to convert these categories into larger themes.

January 13, 25 & 26, 2012 Bruce Wellman and Dr. Ash met with principals to share and reflect on site specific data.

January 31 and February 7, 2012 steering committee met to ensure that given all the data collected, all points of view were appropriately and accurately represented.



# Staff Demographics

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# Staff Demographics

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Professional Staff Unit A	<b>21%</b> n=142	<b>40%</b> n=264	<b>19%</b> n=128	<b>11%</b> n= 75	<b>3%</b> n=22	<b>5%</b> n=30



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Central Office & Principals	<b>24%</b> n=6	<b>52%</b> n=13	<b>12%</b> n=3	<b>0%</b>	<b>4%</b> n=1	<b>8%</b> n=2



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All Other Administrators	<b>43%</b> n=13	<b>30%</b> n=9	<b>10%</b> n=3	<b>7%</b> n=2	<b>0%</b>	<b>10%</b> n=3



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Support Staff Unit C & D	<b>43%</b> n=163	<b>33%</b> n=125	<b>12%</b> n=46	<b>4%</b> n=15	<b>3%</b> n=10	<b>5%</b> n=19



# Time Orientations

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Present - Past

Present - Future



# Time Orientations

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## Present - Past

For some veterans this was expressed as a lack of respect by administrators for the history of programs and buildings and in some cases feeling devalued for their beliefs about teaching and past contributions to their schools and the district.



# Time Orientations

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## Present - Future

Teachers with this time orientation spoke about need for goal clarity and the need for time to integrate and apply new professional practices within classrooms and teams.

There is frustration on the part of administrators and some teachers who are supporting new models of instructional and collaborative practice and want to focus on moving their schools forward.



# Administrative Positions

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Changes from 2005 – 2012

Central office	7.1% (1 position)
Teaching staff	10.2% (57.2 positions)
Students	4.17% (255 students)



# Administrative Positions

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## Middle Managers

2005

10 MS Dept Chairs

8 Eval. Team Leaders

1 Dir. Fine & Performing Arts

1 Director of PE & Athletics

2012

5 Dept Heads

9 Eval. Team Supervisors

2 positions

2.5 positions (PE, Athletics,  
Wellness)



# Change Drivers

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1. Shifting relationships with leadership changes.
2. Increased external accountability pressures.
3. Research confirms that professional collaboration increases student learning.
4. The shift from a system of individual schools to being a school system.



# Change Process

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1. Change entails loss and potential values conflicts.
2. Given the complexity of school change, many things need to be changed simultaneously.
3. Effective change requires both top-down and bottom-up approaches to empower successful change processes.



# Change Process

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4. There needs to be ongoing feedback from those most affected by the changes to solicit input, advice and help with problem solving. There are many indications that this has not always been the case during recent change processes in the Lexington Schools.



# Change Process

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5. Change takes time, tenacity, thoughtful leadership and caring relationships.
6. Change is always personal.
7. When acquiring new skills, there is an implementation dip. Teachers require professional development during this phase.



# Three Themes

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- I. A culture of high expectations
- II. Collaborating for success
- III. Leadership capacities



# I. A Culture of High Expectations

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1. Lexington's culture of high achievement is the longstanding, well-respected history of this community.
2. Multiple goals lead to intense workloads and multiple meetings squeezed into already busy days.
3. There is a need to clarify what is mandatory and what is voluntary.
4. Overload and fragmentation.



# I. A Culture of High Expectations

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5. There is a difference between standards and standardization.
6. Professional development, teacher collaborative work and supervisory practices need to organize around these standards.
7. Some instructional assistants, student support instructors, and technology support personnel expressed feeling marginalized, without proper training.



# I. A Culture of High Expectations

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8. The purposes and processes of various forms of student assessment need to be clarified.
9. While staff support the vision of high success for all students, some expressed a need for greater clarity about why and how these changes are initiated, communicated and managed. While there were frequent reports of feeling a top-down orientation from Dr. Ash and other central office administrators, the district needs to examine the appropriate place for different types of decision making.



# I. A Culture of High Expectations

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10. The need for “The Human Touch” to more deeply engage staff members and value their perspectives and concerns.



# I. Recommendations

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1. Create a cohesive graphic image of the desired state of a high performing district – displaying goals, essential processes, interconnections and key points of interaction.
2. While priorities/district goals are clear, implementation processes and next steps need to be clearly specified.
3. Address issues of overload and fragmentation – district, school and teacher-driven.
4. Create an environmental impact statement for all new initiatives and program changes.
5. Develop case studies for selected teachers and staff members to better gauge workload issues.



# I. Recommendations

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## 5. Balance time and tasks.

Three approaches:

- Establish highest priorities – district and school.
- Increase efficiency – work smarter not harder.
- Find more time – adjust schedule, length of work day and/or calendar to match values and goals.



## II. Collaborating for Success

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1. Concern about collaboration was mentioned by some teachers, support staff members and administrators.
2. Treating one another with respect and civility must be a the heart of this work.
3. Professional learning community and data team work are at varying stages of development across the district.
4. Teams need to have authentic shared work and not be ad-hoc collections thrown together to fill out the schedule.



## II. Collaborating for Success

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5. Meetings were a special area of concern both in frequency and quality – there were reports of too many and of poorly run meetings.
6. Special Education teachers complained about poorly planned, poorly organized and poorly facilitated meetings.
7. The working relationship between the Lexington Education Association and district and building leaders is a key arena for focusing improvements in collaborative engagement.



## II. Recommendations

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1. Clarify the expectations and skill sets required for successful collaboration in critical work settings – including skills for administrators on when and how to intervene with low performing groups.
2. Develop meeting design and facilitation skills of administrators, key department leaders and teacher leaders.
3. Develop skills for managing difficult conversations – have key administrators and key LEA members participate in joint training; expand those efforts to other personnel.



## II. Recommendations

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4. LEA and administrators need to jointly identify and clarify key terms to organize productive working relationships e.g. *partnership, collaboration, rights, responsibilities*.
5. Clarify the the working relationship between principals and special education administrators – roles, responsibilities, and processes related to essential decisions about student services.
6. Instructional assistants, student support instructors, secretaries and technology support teachers all expressed the need for proper training and increased opportunities for professional development.



# III. Leadership Capacities

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1. Leading change is important work, requiring careful framing of outcomes and processes with ongoing attention to listening to employee concerns.
2. There was a desire expressed in focus groups and interviews for Dr. Ash to be more visible – to see the impact of systems and building initiatives – to get to know staff and be better known by them.
3. Expanding the definition of leadership – embracing new forms of distributed teacher leadership.



# III. Leadership Capacities

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4. The need for decision making clarity was frequently mentioned. Clarifying the what, why and how of decisions.
  - This was frequently mentioned within the special education department – the data gathered indicate a need for more organization, clearer processes and follow through by department managers.
  - Within the special education department, the lack of shared criteria for decision making distorts the process and staff members feel that their expertise is undercut – reducing confidence in the final decisions.



## III. Leadership Capacities

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5. Decision-making issues have also led to tensions between staff and members of the finance department.
  - There is a disconnect between management functions and the impact on teaching and learning.
  - Ordering processes take too long in some cases.
  - Secretaries report feeling mistreated when errors occur; mistakes are not treated as part of a teaching/learning process.
  - Morale within the finance department needs improvement.



# III. Recommendations

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1. Review and clarify essential understandings about decision making processes and the differing levels of participation in decisions.
2. Develop leadership skills for framing tasks and decisions, including design and delivery skills.
3. Expand opportunities to develop leadership skills by all staff members.
4. Develop clear decision making criteria for special education programming decisions.



# The Road Ahead

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1. The road ahead for the Lexington Public Schools will not always be easy.
2. Compassion and patience for one another will be essential.
3. No one person can manage this alone.
4. You will need to establish a planning and monitoring team to review these recommendations and develop both short-term and long-term goals.



# Last Words

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“The past cannot be changed;  
the future is still in your power”

Hugh White