

NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES
COMMISSION ON PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS

REPORT OF THE VISITING COMMITTEE

NASHUA HIGH SCHOOL SOUTH

NASHUA, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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STATEMENT ON LIMITATIONS

THE DISTRIBUTION, USE, AND SCOPE OF THE VISITING COMMITTEE REPORT

The Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges considers this visiting committee report of Nashua High School South, Nashua, New Hampshire to be a privileged document submitted by the Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges to the principal of the school and by the principal to the state department of education. Distribution of the report within the school community is the responsibility of the school principal. The final visiting committee report must be released in its entirety within sixty (60) days of its completion to the superintendent, school board, public library or town office, and the appropriate news media.

The prime concern of the visiting committee has been to assess the quality of the educational program at Nashua High School South in terms of the school's stated mission and the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. Neither the total report nor any of its subsections is to be considered an evaluation of any individual staff member but rather a professional appraisal of the school as it appeared to the visiting team.

INTRODUCTION

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) is the oldest of the six regional accrediting agencies in the United States. Since its inception in 1885, the Association has awarded membership and accreditation to those educational institutions in the six-state New England region that seek voluntary affiliation.

The governing body of the Association is its Board of Trustees which supervises the work of six Commissions: the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE), the Commission on Independent Schools (CIS), the Commission on Public Secondary Schools (CPSS), the Commission on Technical and Career Institutions (CTCI), the Commission on Public Elementary and Middle Level Schools (CPES), and the Commission on American and International Schools Abroad (CAISA).

As the responsible agency for matters of the evaluation and accreditation of public secondary school member institutions, CPSS requires visiting committees to assess the degree to which the evaluated schools meet the qualitative Standards for Accreditation of the Commission. Those Standards are:

Teaching and Learning Standards

- Mission and Expectations for Student Learning
- Curriculum
- Instruction
- Assessment of Student Learning

Support Standards

- Leadership and Organization
- School Resources for Learning
- Community Resources for Learning

The accreditation program for public schools involves a threefold process: the self-study conducted by the local professional staff, the on-site evaluation conducted by the Commission's visiting committee, and the follow-up program carried out by the school to implement the findings of its own self-study and the valid recommendations of the visiting committee and those identified by the Commission in the Follow-Up process. Continued accreditation requires that the school be reevaluated at least once every ten years and that it show continued progress addressing identified needs.

Preparation for the Evaluation Visit – the School Self-Study

A steering committee of the professional staff was appointed to supervise the myriad details inherent in the school's self-study. At Nashua High School South, a committee of ten members supervised all aspects of the self-study. The steering committee assigned all teachers and administrators in the school to appropriate subcommittees to determine the quality of all programs, activities, and facilities available for young people. In addition to faculty members, the self-study committees included administrators, students, and

parents. The self-study of Nashua High School South extended over a period of four years.

Public schools evaluated by the Commission on Public Secondary Schools must complete appropriate materials to assess their adherence to the Standards for Accreditation and the quality of their educational offerings in light of the school's mission, learning expectations, and unique student population. In addition to using the Self-study Guides developed by a representative group of New England educators and approved by the Commission, Nashua High School South also used the results of surveys compiled by The Endicott Center for Research and Educational Advancement at Endicott College. Information from the school's annual report was also included in the self-study. These materials provided discussion items for a comprehensive assessment of the school by the professional staff during the self-study.

It is important that the reader understand that every subcommittee appointed by the steering committee was required to present its report to the entire professional staff for approval. No single report developed in the self-study became part of the official self-study documents until the entire professional staff had approved it.

The Process Used by the Visiting Committee

A visiting committee of 22 evaluators was assigned by the Commission on Public Secondary Schools to evaluate the Nashua High School South in light of the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. The Committee members spent four days in Nashua, New Hampshire, reviewed the self-study documents which had been prepared for their examination, and met with administrators, teachers, other school and system personnel, students, and parents to determine the degree to which the school meets the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. Since the evaluators represented public school teachers, guidance administrators, central office administrators, and school-based administrators, diverse points of view were brought to bear on the evaluation of Nashua High School South.

The visiting team built its professional judgment on evidence collected from the following sources:

- review of the school's self-study materials and collected evidence
- a total of 66 hours of classroom observation in addition to the student shadowing component
- numerous informal observations in and around the school
- tours of the facility
- shadowing of 22 students for half a day each
- individual meetings with teachers about their work, instructional approaches, and the assessment of student learning
- group meetings with students, parents, school and district administrators, and teachers

- the examination of student work including a selection of work collected by the school

Each conclusion in the report was agreed to by team consensus. Sources of evidence for each conclusion drawn by the visiting committee appear in parenthesis in the Standards sections of the report. The seven Standards for Accreditation reports include commendations and recommendations that in the committee's judgment will be helpful to the school as it works to improve teaching and learning and to better meet Commission Standards.

This report of the findings of the visiting committee will be forwarded to the Commission on Public Secondary Schools which will make a decision on the accreditation of Nashua High School South.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Quality of the Self-Assessment

A comprehensive school restructuring plan in Nashua challenged the administration and faculty of Nashua High School South at the same time as they were completing the self-study. During the four-year process, various groups of students were housed in the facility during construction. The final faculty assignments were made prior to the opening of the school in 2004, and since that time, there have been three different principals and six headmasters. Anchored by an exceptional steering committee, the school has remained committed to the accreditation process and has developed a self-assessment that reflects the faculty judgment of the current status of the standards as well as a clear vision of the future. Each indicator was addressed and rated, and the staff provided the committee with a judgment of where more work was needed. While the committee was able to use the report to confirm the school improvement work underway, it found that the self-assessment did not always highlight all of the positive programs underway in the school and district. Two aspects of the self-assessment were particularly relevant to establishing compliance with the NEASC standards. Throughout the self-assessment and the school visit, it has become clear that the adults of Nashua High School South are committed to living the mission and expectations and to making the improvements needed to enhance the quality of student learning. There is ample evidence that the superintendent, school board, and Nashua High School South's administration and faculty share the commitment to fulfill the promise of the mission statement. Second, throughout the report, there is significant evidence that all adults in this educational community promote a very positive, respectful, and supportive learning environment dedicated to meeting the needs of each student.

Discussion of Significant Findings

Although the conclusions of the visiting committee on the school's adherence to the Commission's Standards for Accreditation appear in various sections of this report, the committee wishes to highlight some findings in the paragraphs that follow. These findings are not intended to be a summary of the report.

Teaching and Learning at Nashua High School South

In its self-assessment, Nashua High School South has identified both its accomplishments and needs; the visiting committee has endorsed many, but not all, of the commendations and recommendations contained in the self-assessment document. The report is an accurate and honest portrayal of Nashua High School South, which will provide directions to the school as it seeks to meet the ever-changing needs of its students. Prescribed actions will require a further commitment of effort by the school and community; improvement can occur only if all the school constituents work collaboratively toward this end.

The mission statement represents the values and beliefs of a broad spectrum of the community, parents, students, teachers, and administrators. It contains realistic and appropriate expectations of student learning. The mission statement guides decision-making in the building and is aligned with district, state, and national goals. It is displayed throughout the building. Nashua High School South has made significant progress toward using its mission statement and expectations for student learning to guide the procedures, policies, and decisions of the school.

The areas of curriculum, instruction, and assessment are clearly acknowledged as vitally important in the self-assessment and are identified as areas in need of improvement. District initiatives have focused on school improvement efforts in restructuring the school and have implemented numerous initiatives in instruction and assessment to focus student learning. The faculty has participated in many of the current initiatives but needs the time to continue its efforts to refine and integrate curricular expectations. Faculty members are knowledgeable about the current research in curriculum and instruction. The challenge to Nashua High School South is to resolve management issues around scheduling and time in order to meet the high expectations articulated in the mission and expectations for students.

The relationship among curriculum, instruction, and assessment is clear. The faculty has participated in focused staff development in the areas of instruction and assessment and has implemented a common lesson plan format. Conversations about student work are rich with examples of thoughtful reflection on the quality of student learning. Desired changes in curriculum documents, instruction, and assessment in the classroom are impeded by the lack of common planning time and professional development opportunities, however. Faculty members have clearly identified staff development needs relative to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, all of which should be incorporated into a long-term professional development plan for the school.

The administration and faculty of Nashua High School South face the challenge of many districts with diverse student populations. Nashua High School South has incorporated plans that have successfully addressed the needs of many of the students; there remains the need to increase attention on students with special needs in order to fulfill the mission of the school.

Support of Teaching and Learning at Nashua High School South

There is significant support from the administration of the school in creating a safe, orderly environment for learning. The school organization is structured to create a learning environment that positively promotes the mission. The overall culture of the school community strongly supports the concept of rigorous academic expectations for all students and celebrates accomplishments. The school climate is positive and caring with a sincere emphasis on meeting the needs of the students. The supportive culture and climate will assist in the continued transition to establishing Nashua High School South as a formidable entity in the education system of the district.

The support staff complements the efforts in the classrooms to meet the needs of all students. A formalized plan for improvement and evaluation of these areas would enhance the existing support structure and align with the school's efforts to fulfill the mission and expectations. The library/media staff has informally participated in curriculum integration projects but should be formally included in the revision process. Guidance services are readily available to students and support the academic, civic, and social expectations of the school, but additional efforts to insure a personalized experience for each student are needed.

Nashua High School South has support from the central office, the school board, and the parent community. Adequate time and funding to support the school improvement efforts are needed to focus on meeting the needs of all students, in particular those who are not meeting school or district standards. The strong theme reiterated by the faculty throughout the self-assessment is that the school is committed to the reform efforts so that improvements can be made to fulfill the mission and expectations for students at Nashua High School South, but adequate funding is vital to that success. With that commitment and the support of the recommendations from the visiting committee, Nashua High School South has the potential to serve as an exemplary educational experience.

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY REPORT

Nashua High School South (NHSS) is located in the southern New Hampshire city of Nashua. It is south of the White Mountains, west of the coast, and north of Boston and has a diverse population of 86,605. Since 1990, the population of Nashua has grown by 8.7% and is currently the second largest city in New Hampshire. Over 25% of the population is under the age of 18.

The largest employers in the Nashua area are related to the defense industry, computer and communications technology, and health care. The per capita income is \$25,209 with a median 4-person family income of \$61,102. Five percent of the population as a whole has incomes below the poverty level; for families with students in the school system, that percentage climbs to 20.7%. The unemployment rate in Nashua is 5.8%.

The Nashua School District has undergone significant economic and demographic changes in the last 10 years. The ethnic enrollment in the district has climbed from 17.7% in 2000 to 21.9% in 2005. The percentage of students eligible for free and reduced meals was 17.2% in 1995; today it is 29.35%. Among the students at NHSS, 14 languages other than English are primary. One out of every four students in the Nashua School District is identified and receiving Special Education assistance. NHSS is currently classified as a school in need of improvement through the No Child Left Behind legislation.

The cost per pupil for the Nashua District in the 2004-05 school year was \$7,936, placing Nashua 9th in the state and significantly below the state average of \$9,100 per pupil. From Fiscal Year (FY) 2002 through 2006, school expenditure increases were 7.7%, 11.6%, 4.1%, 6.5% and 7.7% (budgeted). The 11.6% increase in FY 2003 reflected expenditures associated with the construction of the two new high schools and the opening of the ALT program.

In the fall of 2004, Nashua opened two new high schools, Nashua High School South and Nashua High School North, each intended to house 2,000 students. Planning for these schools began in 1996 when the then Nashua High School faculty considered adopting block scheduling. Over the course of studying this change, it was decided to rebuild the secondary structure in Nashua, moving to two four-year high schools and modifying the junior high schools into middle schools. In addition to moving the 9th grade to the high school level, other changes were implemented: block scheduling was introduced, and organizationally, the schools were split into lower forum (9th grade and 10th grade) and upper forum (academies).

The first building to be completed was the new high school, Nashua High School North, built on Broad Street on the banks of the Nashua River. The original high school, built in 1975, was gutted and rebuilt with some additions once North was completed and opened as an 11th-12th grade facility in the fall of 2002. The sophomore class was housed in the South building through the construction process, occupying various wings of the building as part was torn down and rebuilt. Upon completion of the renovation of South, faculty

members were reassigned, and the district was divided into two sections with the Nashua River being the dividing line between South and North high schools.

The budget process for schools in Nashua begins with the school principals who propose expenditures to the superintendent who in turn works with the board of education. The final approval of the annual budget must come from the board of aldermen, and the mayor. In 2006, the overall city budget increased by 2.5%. For the school district, 54 existing positions were eliminated, over \$500,000 was cut from curriculum writing and computer and major repairs. The school district saw an 11% increase in the cost of electricity and a 45% increase in natural gas costs. The out-of-district placements for special education increased 15% in FY 2006. Finally, the capital improvements appropriation was cut by \$200,000.

The superintendent's proposed budget for 2007 eliminates 19 existing positions, 4 busses, and reduces special education expenditures by \$300,000. Since 2005, Nashua has cut 80 existing positions: 8.5 in administration, 21 teachers, and 50.5 support staff members.

The opening of the high schools precipitated many changes, not all of them involving the physical nature of the buildings. Since opening in September 2004, Nashua High School South has had three different principals and six headmasters. In addition to changes on the administrative level, 37% of the faculty were first year teachers, and the 9th grade teachers were introduced to block scheduling. The formation of academies and forums eliminated the department structure that had been the organization foundation at the high school for many years.

As a result of all these initiatives and changes from economic to demographic to political, the challenge of creating continuity in students' educational experiences fell largely on the shoulders of faculty and staff members at Nashua High School South. Perhaps one of the most telling conclusions we can draw from our self-study is the importance of the student-teacher relationship and the strength and commitment of the dedicated faculty and staff.

With this being said, there are grave concerns about the budgetary forecast for Nashua and the ability of the school to continue to maintain high standards, strong student-teacher relationships (threatened by increased class sizes, staff reductions), and support for the neediest students.

NASHUA HIGH SCHOOL SOUTH MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of Nashua High School South is to create a safe, tolerant and respectful community of inquisitive learners who strive to develop their individual strengths and interests. The school will offer a variety of academic, career and co-curricular programs essential for success after high school. NHSS will promote academic and personal excellence as well as social, civic and global responsibility.

ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS

Students at Nashua High School South will:

1. acquire and evaluate information;
2. think critically and creatively to solve real-life problems;
3. read, write, listen and speak proficiently;
4. communicate effectively using different forms of expression;
5. demonstrate competence in life and work skills;
6. make connections between learning and the world.

CIVIC AND SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS

Students at Nashua High School South will:

1. demonstrate respect and tolerance for all;
2. participate in community service projects and activities;
3. demonstrate an understanding of their roles as active, responsible citizens;
4. practice personal responsibility with integrity;
5. develop their talents and explore options as they plan for their future.

COMMISSION ON PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS

TEACHING AND LEARNING STANDARDS

MISSION AND EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT LEARNING

CURRICULUM

INSTRUCTION

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

TEACHING AND LEARNING STANDARD

1 Mission and Expectations for Student Learning

The school's mission statement describes the essence of what the school as a community of learners is seeking to achieve. The expectations for student learning are based on and drawn from the school's mission statement. These expectations are the fundamental goals by which the school continually assesses the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. Every component of the school community must focus on enabling all students to achieve the school's expectations for student learning.

1. The mission statement and expectations for student learning shall be developed by the school community and approved and supported by the professional staff, the school board, and any other school-wide governing organization.
2. The school's mission statement shall represent the school community's fundamental values and beliefs about student learning.
3. The school shall define school-wide academic, civic, and social learning expectations that:
 - are measurable;
 - reflect the school's mission.
4. For each academic expectation in the mission, the school shall have a targeted level of successful achievement identified in a rubric.
5. The school shall have indicators by which it assesses the school's progress in achieving school-wide civic and social expectations.
6. The mission statement and the school's expectations for student learning shall guide the procedures, policies, and decisions of the school and shall be evident in the culture of the school.
7. The school shall review regularly the mission statement and expectations for student learning using a variety of data to ensure that they reflect student needs, community expectations, the district mission, and state and national standards.