

MEMORANDUM

To: Citizens of Belmont and the Belmont School Community
From: Thomas S. Kingston, Interim Superintendent of Schools
Date: December 4, 2012
Re: NEASC Report about Belmont High School

The recently issued final report of the accreditation visiting team from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges offers many observations and recommendations that resonate and reflect the ongoing improvement plans of staff and leadership at Belmont High School and within the Belmont Public Schools as a whole. However, there are several major and egregious misrepresentations in the report that need to be counterbalanced. Important to understand is that this report is several months late, incorporates some—but hardly all—the corrections and modifications submitted to the author by BHS Principal Dan Richards, and frequently neglects the kind of objective fact-checking conscientious independent news organizations would practice.

The report emerges in consequence of a self-study conducted in the 2010-2011 school year and a visit from an accreditation team of educators in March 2012. Inevitably, these reports are out-of-date in major ways by the time they are issued; and the formal follow-up allows a school principal to describe remedial steps taken, plans for correction or modification, and responses to other findings of the report. Furthermore, the NEASC board has yet to issue any determinations for the seven focal areas, a set of determinations we anticipate receiving this month.

Above all, I believe context is essential: The accreditation report examines the policies and practices of a high school that consistently is among the highest performing in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. However, NEASC does not consider the state's performance measures in issuing findings. Rather, the organization relies upon its own set of rubrics. In this age of accountability and the oversight by state and federal regulators of public school systems, I personally question the future viability of NEASC and the value of public school districts' investment in membership. Nonetheless, as long as NEASC holds monopolistic sway over admissions standards at many colleges and universities, my personal judgment has little practical relevance.

Among the most egregious caricatures, exaggerations, and outright falsehoods in the report are some of the contentions about community resources and, in particular, Belmont's allocation of funds for the schools. The author of the report declares that there have been "ongoing reductions to the school budget." Elsewhere she speaks about "budget cuts." In fact, over the past twenty years, the budget of the Belmont Public Schools has consistently grown each year. We may debate in good faith—and do so annually—about whether the budget increases are sufficient to meet increasing district needs, whether home owners can endure tax increases beyond the legislated 2.5%, whether some programming and positions need to be eliminated to meet available funds, to what extent fees might cover discretionary activities and non-school opportunities—but the statistical fact that the visitors could and should have verified is that every year the absolute amount of dollars for schools has increased, and many times beyond the rate of inflation. In the past decade, the School Department's general fund has increased 45.2% and its

total overall funding (including grants and revolving account fees) increased 59.2%. Overall, the visitors seem not to understand the budgeting process of a Town and unfairly attribute “cuts” to the Town’s warrant committee. Obviously, Town meeting approves budgets; and dollar increases are not “budget cuts.” To cite one Town member’s observation: “The NEASC evaluators...seem to have accepted the notion of insufficient funding without any critical examination of what funding is being provided and how it is used.”

Other major misrepresentations center upon the Belmont High School Building itself. Every year for the past decade, the School Department with the endorsement of Town officials has submitted to the Massachusetts School Building Authority a “Statement of Interest” to renovate the present building and add a wing devoted to science education. The author of the report claims that “implementation has been halted due to budgetary constraints” with a clear implication that the constraints emanate from the Town rather than from the limitations of state funding. The claim is grossly misleading. Now that the Wellington School building project is complete, the School Department and a variety of Town leaders who are deeply knowledgeable about the decade-long renovation plans are banging on the doors of the MSBA to engage in a direct conversation about the feasibility, timing, and funding of renovations and additions to Belmont High School. Furthermore, the contentions in the report about building safety are simply wrong and liable to create concern—even panic—that is unwarranted. With support from the Town’s Capital Budget Committee and subsequent approval of Town Meeting, the Town’s Master Plan has ensured compliance with all safety and accessibility regulations and continued building viability albeit in the hope of eventual renovation. Even this year the School Department has undertaken major modifications to the women’s locker rooms to ensure federal Title IX compliance.

Finally, there are numerous contentions that are erroneous or already addressed. The curriculum directors were reinstated in the FY 2012 budget, and those that were suspended were suspended for one-year only. That they were reinstated and working at the time of the NEASC visit but unrecognized seems misleading. The report strikes a motif about 21st skills without recognition or apparent acknowledgment that the greater majority of the skills as defined by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills are long-imbedded in the Belmont curriculum. There are other findings that were true at the time but addressed since the visit. The report is overdue, the writing infelicitous.

Ultimately, Principal Richards, in consultation with district leadership, will be responding to each of the findings once we learn the specific determinations issued by the NEASC board. In the meantime, I want to emphasize that the leadership at Belmont High School and the educators working there provide an excellent educational program, strongly supported by the leaders and citizens of the Town of Belmont.