

NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

COMMISSION ON PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS

REPORT OF THE VISITING COMMITTEE

TACONIC HIGH SCHOOL

PITTSFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

MARCH 21 - MARCH 24, 2004

Dennis C. Carrithers, CHAIR

Jeff Newman, ASSISTANT CHAIR

Douglas McNally, PRINCIPAL

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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 Taconic High School 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 Taconic High School 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 five 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), and the Commission on Public Elementary Schools (CPES).

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 Taconic High School, a committee of six (6) members with the principal serving in an *ex officio* capacity 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.

The self-study of Taconic High School extended over a period of two and one half years from September 2001 to March 2004. The visiting committee was pleased to note that students and parents had various roles along with the professional staff in the self-study deliberations.

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, Taconic High School also used questionnaires developed by the Office for Research and Education at the University of Maine to reflect the concepts contained in the Standards for Accreditation. 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 it had been approved by the entire professional staff.

The Process Used by the Visiting Committee

A visiting committee of sixteen (16) evaluators was assigned by the Commission on Public Secondary Schools to evaluate Taconic High School in light of the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. The Committee members spent four days in Taconic High School, 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 schools and central office administrators, diverse points of view were brought to bear on the evaluation of Taconic High School.

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

- review of the school's self-study materials
- a total of 48 hours of classroom observation, shadowing 16 students
- numerous informal observations in and around the school
- tours of the facility
- 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 on 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 section of the report. The seven Standards for Accreditation reports include commendations and recommendations that in its 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 that will make a decision on the accreditation of Taconic High School.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Quality of the Self-Study

The self-study completed by the professional staff at Taconic High School covered the particulars of each of the seven Standards of Accreditation and generally gave thorough information for the indicators of success for each standard. For each of the standards, the information provided the committee with findings reflective of the strengths and needs of the school. From those reports, the faculty as a whole identified an overall list of prioritized strengths and needs. The faculty took great care in enumerating the many curricular and co-curricular programs that have been created to assist students in their academic, social, and civic development. Further, the evolution of the school in becoming a comprehensive school featuring academic and vocational opportunities for students was clearly articulated with justifiable pride.

Although the steering committee of the faculty that led the self-study did not include parents, students, or members of the community, it did attempt to describe the whole school community within and outside the school. In the written documents of the self-study and the personal interactions during the committee's visit, the faculty, staff, and administration of Taconic High School were honest, open, and communicative in their reflections about the school.

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 Taconic High School

In its self-study, Taconic High School 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-study document. The report is an accurate and honest portrayal of Taconic High School, which will provide direction to the school as it seeks to meet the ever-changing needs of students. Prescribed actions will require a further commitment of effort by the school and community as improvement can occur only if all school constituents work collaboratively toward this end.

As part of its self-study by the faculty, Taconic High School has developed a new mission statement. While the process did not include parents or other members of the community, the parent organization and the school committee reviewed the mission statement. The statement articulates academic, social, and civic expectations for student learning. However, the three academic expectations only partially articulate the many goals set for students by the curriculum, the Massachusetts State Curriculum Frameworks, and the school improvement plan. Thus, in the mission statement identifies only a few of the many laudable learning goals the school actually has in place. Further use, review, and refinement of the statement may well lead to expanding the list of expectations. The mission statement is displayed in many publications, in the front

lobby, and in many classrooms. Through the use of the academic facilitator time, each student in the school has had an opportunity to learn and understand the mission statement in personal and creative ways. Because the statement is relatively new, it has not yet been used to guide school or district policies and needs to be more fully utilized if it is to become the force that drives the school. Finally, the rubrics developed to set performance levels for successful student achievement of the academic expectations for student learning are in draft form and have not been either formally adopted or implemented. Until that happens, the school cannot determine how students are actually meeting the learning expectations, nor can the appropriate assessments be made to inform curricular or instructional decisions by the faculty.

Taconic High School has a comprehensive curriculum that provides an exemplary array of opportunities for students to practice and achieve each of the school's academic expectations, and, in fact, to go well beyond them. The faculty and administration have worked hard to offer in one building a combination of academic and vocational programs that are remarkable given the size of the school. Students are indeed fortunate to experience a wide range of courses, work experiences, internships, and cooperative ventures that link the school and community. Changes in graduation requirements, reductions in the number of ability levels, and efforts to link academic and vocational students have been extensive. As a result, the challenge to make sure that all students are held to high expectations and have ample opportunities for authentic learning has become an issue the school is actively working on. Teachers have made considerable effort to complete a curriculum mapping project that encompasses each course in the school with the articulation of course goals, clear links to the Massachusetts State Curriculum Frameworks, instructional strategies, and resources. Most of the course descriptions also reference the relationships to the mission statement's academic expectations for student learning. Work still must be done to complete the curriculum documents, however. Despite the constraints of local economic and demographic changes, the school is justifiably proud of the creative ways it has found to garner community support and involvement to develop and maintain curriculum offerings for students.

While instructional practices are varied and reflect current research and practice in some areas, more teachers could benefit from a comprehensive professional development program that would provide time and resources for instructional improvement. The faculty desires to have more time to devote to communications within and among departments to share best practices on utilizing a variety of instructional methods. Similarly, the lack of dependable technology available to faculty and students has hampered exploration of how to use the opportunities offered by new technology to improve instruction. Attention needs to be given to working with teachers to help them with instructional practices that will ensure all students are being challenged. Careful review of the present teacher supervision plan is needed to provide effective feedback to help teachers to improve instruction. Furthermore, identifying the specific rubrics for assessing student achievement for the academic learning expectations will give teachers more data on developing and choosing effective teaching strategies that are actually needed for this school population.

As the school identifies the specific academic expectations for student learning in each department and for each course, the importance of developing more varied and usable assessment tools will become clear. Both students and parents deserve to have clearly identified

and clearly communicated measures by which to judge student growth and performance on school-wide and department goals. The use of rubrics for the academic expectations for student learning, further use of MCAS results to benefit all students, and performance objectives for each course will further enhance the ability of teachers to give clear assessments to students and to the community. Faculty members, too, will benefit from developing additional assessment tools. As with professional development in instructional practices, the school district needs to allocate the resources available for the faculty to investigate, identify, develop, and use assessments. By more completely understanding student outcomes, instructional practices can be more effectively modified, curriculum can be more clearly revised, and expectations can be better evaluated than at present. As school personnel are ready and willing to work to these ends, they will be able to use time well to discuss student work in departments and as a faculty as a whole. Linking expectations, instruction, curriculum, and assessment will enable staff members to continue to deserve the current high regard the community has for them.

Support of Teaching and Learning at Taconic High School

The overall quality of the educational opportunities at Taconic High School is commendable. The learning environment is positive, comfortable, and safe. The faculty and administration work hard to maintain an atmosphere that is supportive of students. Clearly, the students value their school as evidenced by the high percentage of students involved in co-curricular activities and the numerous awards students have received. The school has made extraordinary efforts to combine the academic and vocational aspects of the school, raise expectations for success, increase enrollments, attract students from surrounding towns, and generally increase the positive regard from the community.

Despite budgetary constraints, reductions in staff, and reductions in resources, the faculty and administration have been innovative in seeking community partnerships, corporate donations, and parent volunteers to supplement the school's offerings. They are proud of being able to initiate new programs despite severe cutbacks in the budget. Furthermore, under the principal's leadership, the school has sought improvements through such connections as the High Schools That Work program, mentoring new teachers, hiring graduates of the school, and solidifying the school's academic and vocational components. This has led to higher expectations for students and teachers alike. Both teachers and administrators have spent considerable time and energy investing in students' well-being. In fact, without the substantial commitment by the staff, the students at Taconic High School would have been compromised in their learning. Fortunately, the phrase "Students come first" is not just a cliché, but is incorporated into the school's culture and climate. With an experienced and community-knowledgeable school and district leadership team in place, the school has the stability to move forward with solid planning to meet present and future needs. Some of its top priorities are attention to the school schedule so that it encourages faculty communication and so that it provides for the demands of the curriculum, and attracting, nurturing, and retaining effective teachers in view of the retirements coming in the near future.

The student support services enhance the school's ability to meet the academic and social needs of students. The guidance department has initiated programs to communicate information about higher education, work, and career opportunities available to students. Special education staff

work well with each other and with their colleagues in regular classrooms. There are ample provisions to meet the special needs of students and to identify students who are having difficulties. Both departments are in need of more formal means to evaluate services and are interested in having data collection methods devised to provide a source of evaluation and improvement. The library is in need of dependable technological support and adequate resources to meet the needs of faculty and students. The library media specialist is active in connecting the library to the curriculum and in developing outreach to those who are in need of research tools. However, there is insufficient support in terms of professional or paraprofessional staffing to augment the services presently available.

The community of Pittsfield has undergone significant economic and demographic changes that have imposed challenges on the school district. The change from a manufacturing center to a region emphasizing government services, recreation, and tourism has been difficult in maintaining resources available to the schools. However, the community has managed to renovate all the elementary and middle schools and now needs to turn its attention to Taconic High School. The normal wear and tear on a thirty five year old structure and the changing demands for learning necessitate a formal, capital improvement plan for the school. While community members still refer to the school as “the new high school” and have overall sentiment of support for the school’s accomplishments, there needs to be a raising of the level of concern and a sense of urgency in the community to address the facility as a learning center. The general feeling of satisfaction may well stagnate into complacency delaying addressing the modernization and renovation of a school that clearly shows the effects of its age.

Furthermore, the unique circumstance of the City of Pittsfield owning the school buildings and having responsibility for maintenance and repair not only causes school personnel frustration at the lack of attention to school needs, but it has seriously interfered with the education Taconic High School students receive. Maintenance requests and repair work orders are routinely unattended to for prolonged periods of time. As a result, teachers and students cannot use equipment necessary for teaching and learning as happened with the auditorium that was closed because the stage was unsafe and sat idle for the fall and winter of the 2003-2004 school year causing cancellation of student productions. Other numerous examples reveal the lack of the city’s cooperation and communication in effectively attending to the facility needs of the high school.

The administration, faculty, and students of Taconic High School have borne the burdens of the lack of attention to the school facility. Without their perseverance and dedication, the school’s effectiveness would have been severely compromised. Unless the school district and the city aggressively plan for and dedicate attention and resources to the school, the ability of the school is lessened to meet the rigorous standards of the Commission on Public Secondary Schools for teaching and learning, and educational opportunities for the students of Pittsfield are much diluted. If it is given the attention the school deserves, the community can be assured that the high regard in which it presently holds Taconic High School will be enhanced.

TACONIC HIGH SCHOOL

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PROFILE

Taconic High School is a comprehensive high school designed to meet the needs of all students by offering both academic and vocational/technical programs. It is one of two public high schools in the city of Pittsfield and is located approximately two miles west from the center of town. Pittsfield is situated in Berkshire County, a region of hills and low mountains that widen to create the Housatonic Valley in the south. Taconic High School is set on a beautiful rural campus, approximately 52.3 acres in size, accessible only by way of Valentine Road, a local street. Taconic High School is approximately two miles away from U.S. routes 7 and 20. The city bus line service goes right past the entrance of the school.

Once considered a prosperous, blue collar, industrial community, Pittsfield is now moving toward the service and tourism industries. The largest employers in the city are educational, health, and social services. Retail trade is the next largest, followed by manufacturing, arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation, and food services. According to the 2000 census, the median household income is \$35,655 and the average single home cost is \$106,000.

The composition of the student body at Taconic High School has remained stable over the past few years. The largest percent of the student body, 89.82%, is white. The African-American population is 6.41%, Hispanic population is 2.32%, Asian or Pacific Islander is 1.4%, and American Indian or Alaskan is .03%. The Pittsfield Public School district has an enrollment of approximately 6,660 students. The unemployment rate for the Pittsfield area, according to the 2000 census, is 3.7%. Based on district guidelines for income eligibility, 32.9% of the families in this school community qualify for free or reduced lunch.

There are 21 public and independent schools in the community, seven of which are non-public elementary and secondary schools. The students attending Taconic have had diverse educational experiences as they come to us, directly, from two elementary schools and four middle schools. There are currently 1,018 students enrolled at Taconic High School. District wide, there are 57 non-resident youth attending school through tuition or school choice.

Per pupil expenditure in 2002 was \$6,500 in comparison to the state per pupil expenditure that was \$6,623. In 2002 only 26% of the school funds were obtained from local resources. The dropout rate at Taconic High School for the 2001-2002 school year was 5.6%. Average daily student attendance during this time was 90.7%, and the average daily teacher attendance was 96.7%.

Of the 208 graduating seniors in 2002, approximately 41% attended a four-year college, 40% attended a two-year college, 7% entered directly into the workforce, 4% entered the military, and 7% are unaccounted for. Taconic High School students have been recognized for outstanding accomplishments in the following academic and non-academic areas: art and music, vocational/technical, science and technology, civic leadership and service, language, career and business, English, math, and social studies. Nearby educational opportunities for Taconic High School students include Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, Berkshire Community College,

Williams College, and Simon's Rock. Vocational and technical training is available at McCann Technical School and Pittsfield's vocational program. There are also well-established adult education programs at Mildred Elley Business School, the Adult Learning Center, BTEP, and Pittsfield Schools' evening adult learning classes.

Taconic High School is in its seventh year of restructuring to better meet the needs of all students. It has adopted the goals and key practices of High Schools That Work as a framework for action steps to be taken in raising expectations for all students. All students will graduate with a core academic program that used to be reserved for high achieving college preparation students, including four years of English, three years of both math and science, and a year of United States history. Furthermore, students must complete two years of world history, except for vocational students who are required to complete one year of world history. Students will also complete a certification program in business, vocational/technical, or arts and sciences. When the academic facilitator program is fully implemented, every student will have a graduation plan that specifically addresses his or her future plans. Inherent in many of the steps being taken is a goal of increasing parental involvement in insuring student success.

One of the greatest challenges facing Taconic High School is the economic instability of the community and the cuts in school budgets. As a result, Taconic High School's guidance department is understaffed with each counselor responsible for approximately 270 students. There is one school adjustment counselor to meet the needs of more than 1,000 students. In the classroom, student-to-teacher ratios have increased significantly. The difficulty of teaching larger classes is exacerbated by the fact that special educational students make up 17% of Taconic High School's student population, and a large part of the remaining population is of low socioeconomic status. In addition, many departments are required to provide the same high quality of education with far less money for supplies, textbooks, and technical support.

Taconic High School has experienced a large influx of new teachers. Over 25% of its current staff was hired after 1999. To help ensure a smooth entry into the school system, the Pittsfield Public School district provides a new teacher in-service training and each new teacher is paired up with a mentor for the first year in the building. The preparation of Taconic High School's faculty indicates that 83% of the school's teachers have a major in their subject area. Of the 17% who do not have a major, 71% do have a minor in their subject area. In Taconic High School's vocational department, 29% of the faculty has a bachelor's degree and 15% are well advanced in a program to obtain a bachelor's degree. In the academic subjects, 55% of teachers with professional status has a master's degree or higher.

TACONIC HIGH SCHOOL MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of Taconic High School is to provide a safe learning environment where students are challenged to work to their academic and social potentials in striving to become responsible, global citizens.

Expectations for Student Learning

Academic

- Students will demonstrate effective communications skills in a variety of formats.
- Students will use higher order thinking skills
- Students will be able to read, understand and interpret printed materials and other media.

Social

- Students will work collaboratively and develop appropriate interpersonal skills.
- Students will demonstrate tolerance of abilities, cultures and individual differences.
- Students will show responsible personal and social behavior.

Civic

- Students will demonstrate an awareness of their rights and responsibilities as citizens, consumers and workers in a global society.

**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

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 school's mission statement shall represent the school community's fundamental values and beliefs about student learning and the purpose of the school and be consistent with the district's mission statement.
2. The school shall have established expectations for student learning that:
 - reflect the school's mission statement;
 - identify high expectations for all students in academic, civic, and social areas;
 - specifically state what all students should know and be able to do by the time they graduate from the school taking into account the skills, competencies, concepts, and understandings identified by district, state, and national standards and by professional organizations.
3. The mission statement and expectations for student learning shall be developed by the school community and approved and supported by the faculty, the school board, and any other school-wide governing organization.
4. The school shall utilize a variety of data to regularly review the mission statement and expectations for student learning to assure that they reflect student needs, community expectations, the district mission, and state standards.
5. There shall be a separate document developed by the faculty that defines the school's academic expectations for student learning in specific, measurable ways, describes specific levels of performance, and indicates which level is the indicator of successful accomplishment.
6. The mission statement and expectations for student learning shall guide the procedures, policies, and decisions of the school and shall be evident in the culture of the school.

Conclusions

Taconic High School's mission statement represents the faculty's fundamental beliefs about student learning and the purpose of the school. The philosophy of the mission statement is based on the belief that all students should be challenged. This clearly connects with the district's mission statement that emphasizes students' development to their fullest potential and the betterment of society as a whole. Taconic has adopted key practices from High Schools That Work (HSTW) to accelerate learning and set higher standards. Taconic High School began its affiliation with HSTW in 1994. Its adoption of HSTW key practices has led to a restructuring of its academic and vocational programs with an increased emphasis on each student's choice of path after high school. This school improvement process was a precursor to the school's development of the mission statement and expectations for student learning. As a result, the mission statement is highly oriented to professional internal and external sources not necessarily to community beliefs and desires. (self-study, district mission statement, panel presentation)

The process for review and revision of the mission statement began in the fall of 2002. The faculty formulated a rough draft of the mission statement and solicited further input from the parent advisory council (PAC) and the school committee. In determining the core values and beliefs of the school, the faculty was afforded opportunities to express and discuss their individual ideals and philosophies during a series of faculty meetings. The resulting mission statement is a genuine expression of the faculty's conviction that the "students come first". (self-study, teachers, district mission statement)

Through these faculty meetings, the proposed mission statement was discussed and eventually agreed upon and accepted in the winter of 2002. The faculty continued to develop student expectations based on the adopted mission statement, culminating in a unanimous vote in favor of the entire document in June of 2002. The mission statement and expectations were put before the school committee for review and approval. Aside from the faculty input, involvement from other school community members was minimal. Although some input was solicited after the mission statement was adopted, there were no parents, students or community members included on the missions and expectations committee. Consequently, the school's self-study report statement that the mission statement "directly represents the fundamental values and beliefs of the . . . community about student learning" may be true but is a conclusion that should be more clearly validated during regular reviews of the statement by, if possible, a more inclusive group. (teachers, school committee, self-study)

In support of the school's mission statement, Taconic has developed three academic, three social, and one civic expectation. These expectations broadly address the skills all students need to acquire by the time of graduation. The three academic expectations only marginally address the content required by Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and align with some district-wide goals that more broadly include additional methods to improve student performance. Furthermore, the academic expectation that "students will demonstrate effective communication skills in a variety of formats" is vague. The school's improvement plan is not closely aligned with the mission statement and expectations. Thus, while the school improvement plan has specific writing goals, these are not clearly reflected in the academic expectations for student learning. (self-study, district goals, Taconic school improvement plan)

The Taconic High School faculty has developed a draft-only document that describes the level of performance for each academic expectation. Moreover, it has also drafted a document for the social and civic expectations. However, the faculty has not formally approved these rubrics nor have they been implemented. As written, the levels of performance for each expectation have not clearly articulated specific levels of measurable performance of success. Furthermore, there is no immediate plan for implementation of the rubrics. Many classroom teachers use individual rubrics for assignments, but no school-wide assessments are in place to measure the student performance on these expectations. Without defining the levels of academic performance related to the school's expectations for student learning, the school cannot comprehensively assess the extent to which all students are being held to high academic expectations. (self-study, administrators, teachers)

Although the mission statement and expectations was formally adopted in June 2002, it is still in the process of being incorporated into the everyday life of the school. Since the document is still in its infancy, the school has not yet defined a review process. A process should be established that regularly reviews the document and that incorporates input from the greater community. (teachers, self-study, administrators)

The mission statement is clearly posted in the majority of classrooms. It is also evident in high visibility areas such as the main lobby, the display case outside the library, and in various areas throughout the schools. The faculty has done much to communicate the document and make it part of the culture of the school. To personalize each student's educational experience, the school created an advisory system of small groups of students meeting periodically with academic facilitators. They have devoted considerable time and effort to help students understand the mission statement through various mediums and activities. However, it is not fully clear that the mission statement and expectations for student learning guide the procedures, policies, and decisions of the school. The document should be explained to the community and parents in general and made part of all official school documents and publications until everyone knows its tenets. As a result, the entire educational community can unite in knowledge and support of the school's goals. (classroom observations, self-study, school committee)

Commendations

1. The sincere belief of the faculty and support staff that students come first and the actions that reflect that belief
2. The activities introducing the mission statement and expectations to students
3. The school reform programs, such as High Schools That Work, introduced in recent years, and still in place, that are intended to improve student learning and help each student reach his/her fullest potential

Recommendations

1. Formulate and implement a process to review the mission statement and expectations on a regular basis by an inclusive group representing all aspects of the educational community, insuring that the data reviewed clearly reflects community expectations as well as state, national, and school-wide standards
2. Continue to develop and then implement school-wide rubrics that specifically measure the mission statement's academic expectations and clearly articulate the targeted levels of successful performance
3. Ensure that the school improvement plan and the mission statement's academic expectations for student learning are clearly aligned
4. Use the mission statement to guide the procedures, policies, and decisions of the school
5. Increase the understanding of the mission and expectations among the school committee, parents, students, and the rest of the greater school community
6. Utilize the academic expectations for student learning to assess student performance, inform curriculum development, and improve instruction

TEACHING AND LEARNING STANDARD

Curriculum

The curriculum, which includes coursework, co-curricular activities, and other educational experiences as described in the program of studies, is the school's formal plan to fulfill its mission statement and expectations for student learning. The curriculum links what the school believes and expects students to learn to its instructional practices. The strength of that link is dependent upon staff commitment to and involvement in a dynamic process of review, evaluation, and revision of the curriculum based on the school's expectations for student learning.

1. From the document that defines the school's academic expectations, each curriculum area shall identify those expectations for student learning for which it is responsible and shall have clearly articulated learning standards in support of such expectations.
2. Written curriculum documents shall be aligned with the school's expectations for student learning and shall guide content, instruction, and assessment.
3. The curriculum plan shall ensure that all students have sufficient opportunity to practice and achieve each of the school's academic expectations for student learning.
4. The content of the curriculum shall be intellectually rigorous and provide opportunities for the authentic application of knowledge and skills.
5. The curriculum shall be appropriately integrated and shall emphasize depth of understanding over breadth of coverage.
6. The school shall provide opportunities to extend student learning beyond the normal course offerings and the school campus.
7. There shall be effective curricular coordination and articulation between and among all academic areas within the school as well as with sending schools in the district to insure the expectations for student learning are being addressed.
8. Instructional materials, technology, equipment and supplies, and staffing shall be sufficient to allow for the implementation of the curriculum.
9. There shall be ongoing review and evaluation of the curriculum that takes into account the assessments of student performance in achieving the school's academic expectations for student learning.
10. The school shall commit sufficient time, financial resources, and personnel to the review and evaluation of curriculum.

11. The professional staff shall be actively involved in the development and revision of the curriculum.
12. Professional development activities shall support the development and implementation of the curriculum.

Conclusions

Taconic High School's curriculum offerings are rich and varied and meet the learning needs of its diverse student body. In addition to core academic departments (English and language arts, math, science, social studies, foreign language), and art, music, human development, and physical education, its vocational-technical curriculum covers a wide range of subjects from auto body to graphic design and health technologies. The school's business program includes an Academy of Finance (AOF) and Academy of Information Technology (AOIT), both affiliated with the National Academy Foundation. There is hardly an area of human endeavor that Taconic students cannot study. (program of studies, self-study, curriculum documents)

The faculty has spent considerable time and effort to develop extensive detailed curricula for each department and each course, known as curriculum documents. However, the documents do not consistently identify the learning expectations from the mission statement for which specific curriculum areas are responsible. The documents describe the content of each course, along with its central objectives, major activities, general expectations, texts, resources, and methods of assessment. Courses are aligned to state and national frameworks, but they are not consistently aligned with the school's expectations for student learning. Some documents reference all the learning expectations, whereas, some reference only a few of them, and some none at all. For example, all courses offered in the social studies area make specific reference to the expectations for student learning, but half of the documents for math courses do not reference the learning expectations from the mission statement. In the foreign language area, Latin and Spanish courses are clearly aligned with learning expectations, but French courses are not. In the business area, 12 of 19 courses are not clearly aligned with expectations for student learning. Part of the problem is that the format for curriculum documents does not specify a place to reference the learning standards. In documents that do reference the learning standards, those references appear in different places on the form, some under central objectives, others under general expectations. As a result, parts of the curriculum are not clearly linked to what the school believes and expects its students to learn. Until all curriculum documents are clearly and consistently linked to expectations for student learning, it is difficult to ensure that all students have sufficient opportunity to practice and achieve the academic expectations. (curriculum documents, teachers, school leaders)

It is difficult to determine the intellectual rigor of curriculum content in the absence of more detailed school-wide rubrics that specify levels of performance. When it comes to defining intellectual rigor, the rubrics in the current draft are too vague. For example, the third academic expectation states: "students will be able to read, understand, and interpret printed materials and other mediums." The level of performance defined as advanced is described in the rubric as: "read a variety of materials for information, pleasure, and personal growth." On the other hand,

proficient performance is described as: “read materials for information, pleasure, and personal growth.” Thus, it is difficult to determine how the “advanced” rubric descriptor is more rigorous than the “proficient.” (curriculum documents, mission statement, draft rubrics)

Students are given extensive opportunities for the authentic application of knowledge. For example, culinary arts students work daily in preparation and serving of food in the Epicurean Room, a student run restaurant. Art students participate in juried shows such as the Boston Globe/Scholastic Art Awards. Students from the Taconic High School Academy of Finance attend the Business Professionals of America’s national leadership conference. The bridge building project in physics is a very realistic application of scientific knowledge. Vocational-technical students and students from the academies serve internships with local businesses. Support systems are in place to help students succeed, such as the highly regarded MCAS remediation course. Some examples of student work in academic subjects demonstrate higher order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, comparison, inference and evaluation. However, most of these examples were from honors courses. In intensive classes, challenging learning experiences do not appear to be demonstrated as consistently. For example, in one intensive class observed, students assigned to create a timeline were told exactly which names and dates to use by the teacher. The school must ensure that all levels of students are being sufficiently challenged and can practice applications of skills and knowledge. (self-study, student work, classroom observations)

In spite of a lack of common planning time, Taconic High School has made some efforts to integrate curriculum appropriately. The ninth-grade interdisciplinary project provides an opportunity for freshmen to experience integrated learning. Students of all grades are required to read and write in every discipline, offering opportunities for creative assignments such as a freshman biology essay called “My Life as a Chromosome.” The senior process paper demonstrates an opportunity beyond the freshman year to combine English with vocational subjects. Project-based learning is evident throughout the school. In the vocational area, students repair auto engines and bodies, sometimes for their teachers and community members. The print shop produces tickets and programs for student performances. Foreign language students construct books written in the language they study. Within departments, there are informal efforts to create integrated curriculum such as the two-year world history and cultures program in social studies. However, teachers admit that such efforts depend upon “fortuitous alliances.” (self-study, observations, student shadowing)

Evidence of emphasis on depth of understanding over breadth of knowledge is harder to find. Classroom observations reveal numerous examples of instructional practice that focused on “covering the material.” Taconic High School’s self-study states frankly that fostering critical thinking while simultaneously preparing students for content-based MCAS tests and SATs is a challenge. Furthermore, until school-wide rubrics define in detail levels of achievement of academic expectations of student learning, it will be difficult to determine whether curricula emphasize depth of understanding. (self-study, observations, draft rubrics)

Students, teachers, and parents agree that Taconic High School provides many opportunities for student learning to occur beyond the regular course offerings and outside the school campus. Eligible students can take courses for credit at Berkshire Community College. There is a strong

emphasis on school-to-career planning beginning freshman year and continuing to graduation. Freshmen attend an off-campus career fair. Sophomores job shadow and write about the experience in their English classes. Junior and senior vocational-technical students participate in cooperative education. Academy students have internships with local businesses. Seniors usually do community service projects through their English classes. Taconic students are encouraged to apply their learning outside school. For example, the social studies department's History of New England course offers students a chance to travel the Mohawk Trail and document their discoveries with photographs and journals. Science students write for the annual IEEE and MassBioEd essay contests and compete in the Western Massachusetts Chemistry Olympiad, as well as the Massachusetts State Envirothon. Creative writing students have had their work published in the school literary magazine and in local and regional publications. More than forty co-curricular clubs and sports teams cater to a diverse set of student interests and needs. Students have extensive learning opportunities that extend into the community and beyond the classrooms. (self-study, student work, parents)

In spite of the best efforts of teachers and administrators, curriculum coordination, articulation, and review are impeded by a lack of time and money and by competing priorities. For example, budget cuts forced the district to stretch a planned five-year curriculum renewal cycle to six years. System curriculum coordination is understaffed. Portions of the K-12 curriculum currently in place are outdated. Staff and faculty meeting time for curriculum work has been superseded by the self-study and preparations for the NEASC visit. Teachers and administrators report that it is difficult to meet with sending schools to review and align the curriculum. The library is used to some degree to serve curricular needs, but the lack of a library aide and common planning time make it difficult for the library media specialist to assist with curriculum integration. (self-study, teachers, school leadership team)

There have been some effective efforts to coordinate curriculum. For more than five years, the district has provided training in Creating Independence through Student-Owned Strategies (CRISS) for virtually every teacher in the system. This gives teachers and students common language and techniques to develop reading and writing skills. CRISS posters are prominent in many classrooms, and students make use of techniques such as double-column notes and graphic organizers on a regular basis. Individual teachers also attempt to coordinate curriculum on an informal basis. However, the obstacles are daunting. Without more resources devoted to this key area, the district cannot ensure that the expectations for student learning are being addressed. (self-study, teachers, observations, support staff)

Instructional materials, technology, equipment and supplies, and staffing are insufficient to allow for the full implementation of the curriculum. According to the self-study survey, more than half of the teachers did not feel they had up-to-date textbooks for all of their students. Four out of five teachers said there was not sufficient money in their budget to purchase new books. Some English classes are sharing textbooks, and the culinary arts program has no textbook at all. Most students have access to computers. On the other hand, teachers report that the computers are often unreliable and there is no person in the building to provide immediate technical support. Ninety percent of teachers reports they have insufficient money in their budget to purchase or repair materials, supplies, or equipment. For example, a freshman biology teacher writes all her notes on her whiteboard for students to copy by hand because her budget allows her to

photocopy only tests. Many teachers purchase supplies and equipment out of pocket. Unless funds are allocated to provide for materials, technology, equipment, and supplies, students will continue to be hampered in meeting the curricular goals of the school. (observations, teachers, self-study)

Staffing is a serious concern. Forty-nine percent of teachers feels there is insufficient staffing in their department to implement their curriculum. A large number of retirements in progress requires departments to hire and train new teachers who are unfamiliar with the curriculum. Course loads, while acceptable on average for the school, are unacceptably high in some core academic areas. For example, Algebra I has four sections with enrollments that are 27 or above. Honors World History classes have enrollments of 28, and an intensive level course of the same subject has a class with 30 students. There are also 32 students in honors English 11. The school district needs to address the challenges of attracting, training, and retaining enough teachers to maintain effective class sizes if the curriculum is to be implemented as designed. (teachers, self-study, school documents)

On a limited departmental or individual basis, there is an effort to review and evaluate curriculum that takes into account assessments of student performance in achieving the school's academic expectations for student learning. For instance, English teachers analyzed MCAS results and identified a weakness in their students' understanding of poetry, and, as a result, they revised the department curriculum to increase the poetry unit to four weeks. Additionally, High Schools That Work (HSTW) technical assistance visits have helped to determine strengths and weaknesses. In 2001, HSTW recommended tougher graduation requirements that included four units of college prep English, along with more demanding math, science, and technology requirements. Progress in vocational-technical curriculum has been uneven as well. The National Automotive Technical Education Foundation recertified the auto mechanics program in November 2002. The culinary program began to explore certification from the American Culinary Federation, but lack of funding halted the process. (self-study, draft rubrics, panel presentation)

Taconic High School strives with mixed results to find time and personnel to review and evaluate curriculum. The K-12 language arts program initiated the district curriculum renewal cycle and has followed up on its findings. There is also some progress in renewing the math curriculum. But other departments have been delayed in the renewal process by lack of funds. For example, the science department started the curriculum renewal cycle in the fall of 2001 and met only twice before funding ran out. As a result, although Taconic High School has established its own subcommittees to review and evaluate curriculum, only 24 percent of the faculty and 33 percent of parents feel that the school commits sufficient time, money, and personnel to review and evaluate the curriculum. (self-study, teachers, curriculum committee)

The faculty and administration have been actively involved in the development and revision of curriculum. During the school year 2001-2002, all teachers created curriculum maps for the subjects they taught. Teachers worked collaboratively in their subject areas during professional development time, department meetings, and on their own time. These curriculum maps are the foundation for the curriculum documents that drive instruction. By creating these maps, the staff was able to discuss, critique, and improve curriculum on a regular basis. However, these maps

vary in content and quality. Due to time and budget constraints, no formal processes are in place to ensure that all teachers continue to be involved in curriculum development and revision. Furthermore, until Taconic High School adopts detailed school-wide rubrics for its expectations for student learning, it will be impossible to use assessments of student performance to evaluate curriculum, even when external forces are assisting. (self-study, curriculum maps, teachers)

Taconic teachers have ample, no-cost professional development time built into the school day and year, but without setting priorities, it may not be used to address development and implementation of curriculum. Many professional development workshops such as the CRISS initiative, HSTW, the academic facilitator program, and the Systematic Initiative in Mathematics and Science Education have been valuable in the evaluation, revision, and alignment of the school's curriculum to state and national standards. Nevertheless, most of these workshops deal with instruction. High school teachers report that there are insufficient subject-specific professional development opportunities to support the development and implementation of curriculum. Often, they must seek content-based professional development outside the district at their own expense or conduct their own workshops with limited supplies and materials. Additionally, the proliferation of external initiatives supported by professional development activities risks inducing "initiative exhaustion." The danger is that the multiple demands of these initiatives on teachers' attention will cause them to lose focus on their identified curriculum needs. (self-study, teachers, observations)

Commendations

1. The rich and varied curriculum offerings to meet the learning needs of a diverse student body
2. The many opportunities for student learning to occur beyond the regular course offerings and beyond the school campus
3. The project-based learning that is evident throughout the school
4. The co-curricular clubs and sports teams that cater to a diverse set of student interests and needs
5. The strong emphasis on school-to-career planning that begins freshman year and continues to graduation
6. The district-wide training in CRISS that gives teachers and students common language and techniques to improve reading and writing skills
7. The academy programs and the ninth grade interdisciplinary team

Recommendations

1. Identify the learning expectations from the mission statement for which specific curriculum areas are responsible

2. Align curriculum documents with learning expectations in a clear and consistent manner
3. Ensure that the curriculum is appropriately integrated and emphasizes depth of understanding
4. Ensure that the rubrics for the academic expectations for student learning set rigorous achievement levels for all students
5. Use the outcomes of student performance to review and develop curriculum
6. Increase budget allocations to provide sufficient instructional materials, technology, equipment and supplies, and staffing for the effective implementation of the curriculum
7. Provide sufficient subject-specific professional development opportunities to support curriculum development and revision
8. Provide consistent opportunities for all students to practice authentic application of skills and knowledge

TEACHING AND LEARNING STANDARD

Instruction

The quality of instruction in a school is the single most important factor affecting the quality of student learning and is the link between curriculum, learning expectations, and student performance. Instructional practice must be grounded in the school's mission and expectations for student learning, supported by research in best practice, and refined and improved based on identified student needs. Consequently, teachers are expected to be reflective about their instructional practices and participate in professional dialogue with their colleagues about instruction and student learning.

1. Instructional strategies and practices shall be consistent with the school's stated mission and expectations for student learning.
2. Instructional strategies shall include practices that personalize instruction, make connections across disciplines, engage students as active self-directed learners, involve all students in higher order thinking to promote depth of understanding, and provide opportunities to demonstrate the application of knowledge of learning.
3. Teachers shall provide formal and informal opportunities for students to assess their own learning.
4. Teachers shall use feedback from a variety of sources such as other teachers, students, supervisors, and parents as a means of improving instruction.
5. Teachers shall be knowledgeable about current research on effective instructional approaches and reflective about their own practice.
6. Discussion of instructional strategies, practices, and student work shall be a significant part of the professional culture of the school.
7. Adequate time and financial resources shall be committed to ensuring the continuous improvement of instruction.
8. Technology shall be utilized to support instruction and to improve student learning.
9. The school's professional development programs shall provide opportunities for teachers to develop and improve their instructional practices and be guided by identified instructional needs.
10. Teacher supervision and evaluation processes shall be used to improve instruction for the purpose of improving student learning.

Conclusions

At Taconic High School teachers have worked to align instructional strategies and practices with the school's stated mission and expectations for student learning. Higher order thinking, reading, writing and verbal communication skills are introduced, strengthened, and honed through the use of a variety of instructional strategies. Significant professional development time has been allotted for and monies have been spent to effect change in instructional practices, the single most important factor affecting the quality of student learning and the vital link between curriculum, expectations, and student performance. Students are exposed to a variety of instructional practices throughout their day. Across all disciplines, some teachers attempt to involve all students in the acquisition of higher order thinking skills to promote depth of understanding although some are driven by the need to "cover" material. Students report that while many of their teachers, acting as coaches, engage them as self-directed learners working on projects, they do encounter "chalk talk" and round robin reading. There are multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate the application of knowledge both in academics and the vocational area. That application may be found in many forms---a repainted vehicle, a prepared entrée in culinary arts, a character mapping project in English, a memo recommending a certain action after the analysis of data in a business class, a student designed experiment in science or participation in an internship. Students look forward to those classes where instruction is personalized---creating their own version of "upward lift" in Ceramics class or where they can share their own opinions on important issues in a safe and tolerant classroom. Continuous student-teacher interaction in vocational education provides feedback that fosters student understanding and success. Another example of personalization of instruction would be the 9th grade teacher team organized to ease student transition to the high school milieu and ensure their academic success. Formal efforts to make connections across the curriculum are few, but able teachers routinely provide links and relevance between their subject and other disciplines and real world applications. While there are varied instructional practices in evidence throughout the school, however, not all teachers use a multiplicity of approaches consistently. Thus, students with differing learning styles are not all give equal opportunity to learn. (student shadowing, teachers, observations)

Most Taconic High School teachers provide both formal and informal opportunities for students to assess their own learning. Writing is one area worth noting. Eighty-four percent of students polled reported that they drafted, edited, and reworked before being graded. Observation reveals that students reflect in journals and use simple check sheet or grade percent rubrics delineating their tasks in some classes. The school has begun the creation of rubrics that will include specific performance indicators and are tied to the school's expectations for student learning. Until the school adopts more robust rubrics with specific descriptors for performance, however, students will remain unclear about the expectations for judging their work. (Survey information, department chairs, observations)

Teachers do use feedback to modify instruction from a variety of sources such as other teachers and supervisors. Some new teachers have observed both veteran and other newly trained teachers both within and outside of their departments and report that the experience was extremely valuable in their acquisition of teaching strategies. Feedback from supervisors is welcomed and incorporated into teachers' repertoires of instructional strategies. Processes that

would provide feedback from parents and students are not in place, however. (teachers, department chairs, school leaders)

A variety of sources such as teachers, parents, administrators, and department chairpersons indicate that the school's teachers are knowledgeable about current research on effective instructional approaches and are reflective about their practice. The extensive staff training and implementation of instructional strategies such as Creating Independence Through Student-Owned Strategies (CRISS), Understanding Teaching, Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum, and the John Collins Writing techniques translates into a staff that is knowledgeable about current "best practices." Administrators are very supportive in structuring time for peer observations, which have been particularly significant in fostering change and reflective thought about instructional practices. (teacher meetings, teacher interview, department chairs)

Discussion of instructional strategies, practices, and student work as a significant part of the professional culture of the school is dependent upon the grade that one is assigned to teach. Because Grade 9 teachers have common planning time, they allot one of their daily meetings per week to discuss student work and instructional practices. Grade 10-12 teachers engage in informal discussions about instruction during lunch, at duty stations, and in collegial conversations in their work area. Currently, monthly department meetings are the only formalized venue to review student work and work on curriculum integration. Opportunities for faculty members to discuss instructional strategies, practices, and students work should be structured to facilitate connections across the curriculum and share "best practice." (teachers, self-study, standard committee)

On one hand, adequate time and financial resources have been committed to ensuring the continuous improvement of instruction. The 10 half days allotted for professional development indicate its high priority, especially in a community where working parents must provide for their child's care. Some teachers report that they attend a variety of workshops outside the system. The Academy of Information Technology and the Academy of Finance send their chairpersons and teachers to other states for training, the costs of which are underwritten by the National Academies Foundation. However, the need for on-going collaboration and discussion among teachers once they are trained should be addressed if these instructional practices are to be embedded in the school culture. (teachers, self-study, district professional plan)

The use of technology to support instruction and to improve student learning covers a broad spectrum of instructional tools, i.e. computers, audio-visual equipment, overhead projectors, and LCD projectors. Classroom observations indicate that teachers make use of available technology. That availability is limited in that only one LCD properly works, overhead projectors are broken, and shop lab equipment and software are outdated. Many computers in classrooms are not functioning. Teachers hesitate to take classes to the labs because they do not have the level of technical know-how to fix or respond to problems encountered with malfunctioning computers and the lack of functioning mice. There is no information technician assigned to the building although some teachers report that when they have called for help, a technician did respond the following day. However, the general unreliability of the system discourages even the most technologically savvy teachers. As a result, student learning is hampered. (teachers, self-study, facility tour)

The Pittsfield Public School District provides many varied opportunities for teachers to develop and improve instructional practice guided by identified instructional needs. Aspiring supervisors are afforded the opportunity to attend a leadership academy based at a local college. The initiative to train all teachers in CRISS strategies has resulted in a staff that speaks the same language about instructional strategies and student work. This uniform language and types of strategies both enhance student learning and facilitate teacher conversations about instructional practices. Although the training in pedagogy has been a necessary forward thinking initiative, professional development addressing discipline-specific instructional strategies has rarely been planned. As a result, teachers do not have many opportunities to discuss instructional strategies with colleagues teaching the similar content courses. (district professional development plan, teachers, department chairs)

The improvement of student learning through the teacher supervision and evaluation process is limited by infrequent observations. In addition to being evaluated according to a document that conforms to Massachusetts Department of Education guidelines for effective teaching, teachers also select 2-3 goals to focus on during the year. Those goals are only noted in an observation if they are observed. Only department chairpersons actually spend an entire class period with the teacher observing the full development of the lesson from initiation through closure. Chairpersons' teaching schedules and added duties limit when and how often they may observe classes. Additionally, according to the contract, non-professional teachers are observed at least two (2) times a year during their first three years of employment while teachers with professional status are observed on at least one (1) occasion in a 2-year cycle. All the instructional leaders of the school can ensure effective change in instructional strategies and practices only if there is sustained and frequent supervision. Efforts by the administrators and the department chairs to monitor and improve instructional strategies are severely hampered by both the limited number of visitations and the demanding teaching schedules of the department chairpersons. (department chairs, teachers, evidence room)

Commendations

1. The ninth grade team and its model of common planning time
2. Multiple opportunities for the application of student knowledge both in school and real world settings
3. The wide variety of instructional strategies and practices
4. The ability of most teachers to speak in a common language of the CRISS professional development
5. Adequate time and financial resources committed to the improvement of instructional practices
6. The faculty and administration commitment to reading and writing across the curriculum

Recommendations

1. Review the teacher supervision and evaluation process to maximize the opportunities to monitor and improve instructional practices
2. Provide necessary time, professional development, and resources to the administrators and department chairs to improve and monitor instructional practices
3. Ensure that all teachers use a variety of strategies to improve instruction
4. Support, fund, and implement the technology plan to fully integrate technology to support instruction and improve student learning
5. Update software and equipment to instruct current technologies that will adequately prepare students for future employment and further education
6. Provide a mechanism for feedback from parents and students on improving instructional practices
7. Provide discipline-specific professional development on instructional practices
8. Examine ways to encourage discussion of instructional strategies and student work for the teachers of grade 10-12

TEACHING AND LEARNING STANDARD

Assessment of Student Learning

Assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Its purpose is to inform students regarding their learning progress and teachers regarding ways to adjust their instruction to better respond to the learning needs of students. Further, it communicates the growth and competence of students to parents, school officials, and the public. The results of student learning must be continually discussed and used to develop short-term and long-term strategies for improving curriculum and instruction.

1. Teachers shall base their classroom assessment procedures on clearly stated expectations for student learning.
2. Specific learning criteria based on specific expectations for student learning shall be the basis for grading and reporting.
3. Teachers shall use a variety and range of classroom assessment strategies to determine student knowledge, skills, and competencies and to assess student growth over time.
4. Teachers shall use the results of classroom assessment of student learning to evaluate and revise the curriculum.
5. Teachers shall use the results of classroom assessment of student learning to improve their instructional practices.
6. Teachers shall meet to discuss and share student work and the results of classroom assessment for the purpose of revising the curriculum and instructional strategies.
7. Teachers shall communicate to students and their families how student work and progress are being assessed.
8. The school's professional development programs shall provide opportunities for teachers to develop a broad range of assessment strategies for classroom use.
9. The administration and faculty shall use agreed upon levels of performance, indicators of successful accomplishment, and other data to assess the progress of students in achieving the school's stated academic expectations for student learning and regularly report the findings to the public.
10. The administration and faculty shall use assessment data to determine student success in meeting the school's stated civic and social expectations and regularly report the findings to the public.

Conclusions

Many of the teachers at Taconic High School provide students with the learning expectations in courses in the form of syllabi distributed at the beginning of courses or for units being studied. However, the school's mission statement, academic expectations for student learning, and curriculum documents do not include clear, consistent, rigorous expectations for all students in every course. Consequently, teachers, grades and assessments, including mid-term and final exams, vary widely in the expectations they reflect. Departments have developed common mid-term and final examinations for courses, but they vary in their standardization of questions and test format. The lack of standardization contributes to the variance in expectations presented to students. Furthermore, while students do take mid-term exams and final exams, their performance on these exams is not quantified, disaggregated, and analyzed in a systematic manner. Consequently, the school has limited opportunity to consider and improve student, teacher, and school performance and progress (mission statement, curriculum documents, teachers)

Observations of classes, student work, mid-term exams, and final exams indicate that teachers also vary in their use of different assessment strategies. Some teachers routinely use various assessment strategies; however, others rely primarily on multiple choice and other objective assessments. There have been few formal opportunities for faculty dialogue about assessment strategies, the variety of assessments available to teachers, or commonly agreed on assessment techniques. (observations, self-study, teachers)

Only a small number of teachers uses well-constructed rubrics and exemplars to communicate expectations and assess student work. Some rubrics include specific learning criteria based on clear expectations; others do not. School-wide rubrics that are aligned with the school's academic expectations have been developed. They are in draft form and have neither been adopted nor implemented. It is not clear that there are specific plans to put them into place. The rubrics do represent a first step in defining school-wide performance criteria that can be used in courses throughout the school. Students indicate that clear assessment criteria (e.g., focus correction areas, rubrics) were used in some writing assignments and understood in advance. Some students had the opportunity to view examples of excellent, good, and fair writing as models of teacher expectations. Some students find that individual assessments and assessments of small group work are fair and often based upon self-assessment. As a result, although rubrics have been created and some students have begun to be trained in their use, a concerted effort to implement them is needed. (self-study, teachers, students)

Most teachers use and students observe that the results of ongoing classroom assessments are used to evaluate and revise the curriculum, improve instruction, and meet individual student needs. The vocational department has adopted defined competencies and national performance standards. Teachers and department heads state that other assessments (e.g., mid-term exams, final exams, Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, National Assessment of Education Progress) are used less frequently and less effectively to assess and revise curriculum and instruction. Until the school identifies and begins to use the school-wide rubrics for the academic expectations for learning, it will not have sufficient data to inform decisions about curriculum revisions or changes in instruction. Nor will it have clear understandings about how student achievement in completing the agreed upon expectations for student learning. (self-study, teachers, students)

The administration and faculty do not use agreed upon levels of performance, indicators of successful accomplishment, or other data to assess and improve the progress of all students in meeting the school's stated academic expectations for student learning and the state's performance standards because those rubrics have yet to be implemented. The school's academic expectations for student learning are not quantified, with explicit improvement goals applicable to all students. The addition of formative assessment strategies is necessary to add to the summative nature of the MCAS testing. Some teachers, all department heads, and the principal did state that the MCAS performance levels in English language arts and math are important indicators used to measure student performance and school progress. However, MCAS scores have been used primarily to consider and improve the performance of only the lowest performing students. The testing data have not been used to systematically analyze and improve the performance of students at levels 2, 3, and 4 despite the fact that only forty-seven percent of the students who took the MCAS in 2003 performed at the proficient or advanced levels in English language arts and forty-two percent performed at these levels in math. This is of particular importance given the school's need to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals for all students and the special populations defined by the Massachusetts Department of Education. (teachers, department heads, administrators)

The principal endorses the need to increase the number of students performing at levels 3 and 4 on the MCAS, but so far this interest is not a high priority for teachers nor is MCAS data used to assess and improve all students' performance. The professional staff needs to utilize a broad range of assessments beyond just the MCAS results. Parents affirm that more work needs to be done to address the academic needs of students who are performing "in the middle". Newsletters, parent letters, and MCAS reports are used in a limited manner to communicate to families the students' performance on the MCAS. In order for students, parents, and the community as a whole to understand how the school is performing in meeting the stated expectations, more communication is necessary about the assessment information related to the school's academic, social, and civic expectations for students. (teachers, guidance counselors, parents)

The school's professional development program has provided some opportunities for teachers to carry out all of the assessment work alluded to above (e.g., developing effective curriculum documents; developing additional assessment strategies for classroom use: CRISS; some work on the use of MCAS data to assess curriculum and instruction). Except for the ninth grade teachers who have common planning time, teachers rarely have the opportunity to share and use assessment data to evaluate and improve curriculum and instruction. Nor do they regularly discuss student work. The school has yet to use available meeting, planning, and professional development time to bring teachers together on a regular basis to engage in discussion about assessment. Sufficient, school-wide professional development opportunities have not been systematically provided. With the additional time being proposed to add additional time to the school day or in other ways the school can determine, teachers need to be working collaboratively on analyzing student performance assessment data to determine the effectiveness of teaching and learning at Taconic High School. (self-study, teachers, administration)

Since the school's mission statement and expectations for student learning is relatively new, fully assessing how students are performing relative to those goals has not been possible. As Taconic High School identifies and implements the school-wide rubrics for the academic expectations, it will

be able to communicate to students, parents, and the community as whole the levels of performance students have achieved and the performance of the school as a whole. Similarly, identifying how the social and civic expectations are to be assessed will also enable the school to report on the progress to those goals as well. (self-study, administrators, teachers)

Commendations

1. The use of common, course-specific, mid-term and final exams
2. The use of multiple assessment strategies by many teachers to accommodate students' different learning styles
3. The vocational program's use of defined competencies, performance standards, and national standards

Recommendations

1. Use formative as well as summative strategies to set improvement goals for all students
2. Provide opportunities and support for the faculty to discuss and share student work
3. Develop and implement common assessments and use the data to improve curriculum and instruction
4. Develop common course-specific, department-wide, and interdisciplinary performance assessments students must complete
5. Identify and use school-wide rubrics to set high performance standards for all students and to ensure that the academic expectations for student learning are met
6. Regularly inform parents and the community about the progress of students in achieving the school's academic, social, and civic expectations
7. Provide professional development for faculty to develop a broad variety of classroom assessment strategies

**COMMISSION ON
PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

SUPPORT STANDARDS

Leadership and Organization

School Resources for Learning

Community Resources for Learning

SUPPORT STANDARD

Leadership and Organization

The manner in which a school provides leadership, organizes itself, makes decisions, and treats its members profoundly affects teaching and learning. Faculty and administration must be clear and reflective about and responsible for the decisions and practices they have implemented in organizing and structuring their programs and in creating a culture that supports learning for all students.

1. The principal shall provide leadership in the school community by building and maintaining a vision, direction, and focus for student learning.
2. Teachers shall provide leadership essential to the success of school improvement.
3. The school board and superintendent shall ensure that the principal has sufficient autonomy and authority to guide the school in its mission and in meeting the school's stated expectations for student learning.
4. The organization and structure of the educational program shall promote the school's mission and expectations for student learning.
5. Student grouping patterns shall reflect the diversity of the student body, foster heterogeneity, and be consistent with the school's mission and expectations for student learning as well as current educational research.
6. The schedule shall support the school's mission and expectations for student learning and should be designed to provide the most effective implementation of curriculum and instruction.
7. School leaders shall accord meaningful roles in the decision-making process to students, parents, and members of the staff to promote an atmosphere of participation, responsibility, and ownership.
8. Each teacher shall have a student load that enables him/her to provide sufficient attention to the needs of individual students.
9. The school shall provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate within and across departments.
10. All school staff shall be involved in promoting the well-being and learning of students.
11. Student success shall be regularly acknowledged, celebrated, and displayed.

12. The climate of the school shall be positive, respectful, and supportive, resulting in a sense of pride and ownership.
13. The professional culture of the school shall be characterized by thoughtful, reflective, and constructive discourse about student learning and well-being in both formal and informal settings.

Conclusions

The Taconic High School principal has encouraged the exploration and adoption of various models of school reform and renewal during the past 10 years and has raised expectations for student learning. The principal has been a positive influence and is held in high regard by teachers, parents, support staff, and the community at large. The principal communicates with staff and parents, and he maintains a high level of visibility in school. The school board and the superintendent have given the principal sufficient autonomy to guide the school and to work toward meeting the stated expectations for student learning. (parents, teachers, school committee)

Despite the support for the principal as the school's leader, there is still a need to have greater formalized collaboration with faculty, parents, students, and community in the decision-making process. Faculty and parent advisory committees, student groups, and vocational advisory groups do provide opportunities for input, and the principal's open door policy allows for stakeholders to volunteer their input. Nevertheless, as noted in the self-study survey, 75 percent of parents and 81 percent of students feel they are not consistently listened to. Increasing the number of formal channels for input and real decision-making by these constituents would create greater community support for the school and improved faculty ownership of curricular initiatives. (self-study, teachers, survey information)

By using the High Schools That Work (HSTW) model to create a common core of learning expectations for all students, the school has made great strides toward creating higher academic expectations and unifying the school academically. Currently, scheduling constraints and the different cultures of the academic and vocational programs are impediments to meeting the academic expectations that have been set, however. This dynamic tension is the natural result of the progress that has been made in this area. To continue to address this issue, many initiatives are being simultaneously pursued, and because of this not all of the initiatives have been fully implemented and evaluated. (self-study, teachers, school documents)

Teachers provide strong leadership throughout the school. They do everything possible to maintain their classrooms and academic programs despite limited resources, and they look for specific ways to change student outcomes. Teachers serve on committees, are active in student life, and are participants in mentoring relationships as well as being involved as trainers for program initiatives. Teachers model leadership qualities to students in classrooms and in the rest of the school environment. The ninth grade team exemplifies the strength of the teacher leadership across the school with their focus on departmental and interdisciplinary curriculum development, student support, and community and parent involvement. Vocational teachers show leadership by providing the resources necessary for a quality learning experience and

successful placement of students in cooperative and post-graduate jobs. The efforts of the faculty are exemplary and help to make Taconic High a healthy and strong environment for students. (observations, teachers, community members)

One of the strengths of the school is the breadth of the educational programs offered. The school's many programs, including the vocational and technical program, the academies and clusters, the arts and sciences program, and advanced placement (AP) course offerings help all students to reach their potential. On the other hand, meeting the structural and organizational needs of these multiple programs distracts the administration and faculty from the core work of raising the academic expectations within each classroom. Meeting graduation requirements and scheduling courses dominate discussions of academic expectations. All programs within the school need to emphasize rigorous academic expectations at the individual classroom level to ensure that all students are pushed to their potential. (teachers, school leadership team, students)

Student groupings at the AP and technical/vocational level do generally reflect the diversity of the school as noted in the self-study. In addition, students are allowed to change the level of their academic classes. The integration of vocational students into academic classes and the elimination of most regular level courses in the 9th grade both reflect the school's move towards more heterogeneous groupings. However, vocational programs attract few non-traditional students. For example, young women are reluctant to go into traditionally male shops such as auto technology or carpentry. The reason given is the physical plant. There are no female bathrooms in the vocational labs. In addition, in the regular level of academic courses, there is a disconcerting concentration of "special population" students in some sections. "Special populations" are defined by the Adequate Yearly Progress indicators of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) as students who are minority groups, handicapped, special education, or economically disadvantaged. In six regular level classes observed, there were 25% or more students of color enrolled in contrast to the lower percentages in school-wide and intensive course enrollment. This fact, whether the result of a real achievement gap, student selection patterns, or institutional bias in scheduling practices, needs to be monitored and addressed to ensure an equitable and supportive school environment as the demographics of Pittsfield become more diverse. (observations, self-study, teachers)

The Taconic High School schedule does not currently provide the most effective implementation of curriculum and instruction. There are conflicts in scheduling between academic and vocational programs, and there is limited access to some classes for some students. Some students do not fill their schedule as there are no courses available to them in specific periods. Students are frustrated when they cannot take the courses they want and are not able to take full advantage of the school's extensive course offerings. Sixty percent of teachers believes there should be a change in schedule to accommodate the variety of needs of the student population. (self-study, survey information, observation)

Student/teacher ratio is an ongoing concern of both faculty and parents as evidenced by the self-study survey statistics that show less than 40% of respondents agreeing that student load allows for individual attention. A majority of faculty members in English, mathematics, and social studies departments have student loads of over 100 students. While class sizes have grown as the staff size has decreased, there is an imbalance in class size between some core content areas

and other courses. Class size is below 25 for at least 75% of classes in each core content area. In business, world languages, and art, 93% of classes or more have less than 25 students. The school's sincere commitment to electives and specialty classes often comes at the expense of larger class sizes in English, mathematics, and social studies. (self-study, teachers, course listing enrollments)

Teachers at Taconic High School collaborate informally and engage in professional dialogue as time and location allows. With a few exceptions, however, there is limited opportunity for collegial discussion or collaboration in a formal setting. There is little common planning time and few opportunities for sharing between departments in formal and regular settings. Most of the ninth grade team does meet each day to discuss students, meet with parents, plan activities, and collaborate on interdisciplinary units. Their initiatives support the school's expectations for academic achievement. Electronic bulletin boards, department and faculty meetings, and professional development are other positive examples, but sharing within departments and across programs is usually done on a sporadic basis. (teachers, self-study, observations)

Taconic High School has a climate that is positive, nurturing, and supportive. This has been a specific improvement over the past ten years. Comprehensive and effective vocational programs, the strengthening of academic expectations for all students, and many extra-curricular initiatives such as open houses, student performances, athletics, and peer leadership contribute to student pride. Specific vocational programs such as the house-building program's open house, special meals by the culinary arts program, and student participation in competitions also contribute to this positive environment. Student work is on display in classrooms and cases throughout the building. Publicized honors lists and athletic and academic award events celebrate student achievement. Students, parents, community members, and district leaders feel strongly that all school personnel are involved with promoting the well-being of students. The school has attracted students from outside the district and has earned the respect of residents. Students report a positive experience that allows them choices as they move on to careers and further education, and they are vocal in their pride in and loyalty to their school. (students, parents, community members)

Commendations

1. The high degree of visibility and accessibility of the principal and the community's regard for him
2. The unified, supportive, and positive climate
3. The teachers' leadership in the school, in mentoring, and in community activities and partnerships
4. The efforts to manage academic expectations for all students
5. The pride of ownership by teachers, students, and community members
6. The promotion of student well-being

7. The celebration of student achievement, particularly social and civic achievement

Recommendations

1. Review and evaluate current initiatives for their effectiveness in helping all students meet the school's academic expectations
2. Develop deliberate and regular opportunities for professional discourse and collaboration among faculty members
3. Design and implement a schedule that facilitates meeting the school's academic expectations and provides optimal implementation of curriculum and instruction
4. Monitor enrollments of special populations in different level courses and plan to address any imbalances
5. Monitor and maintain appropriate class sizes and teacher-student loads
6. Increase formal channels for input and decision-making by parents, students, and community members

SUPPORT STANDARD

School Resources for Learning

The school's student support services include guidance and health services, special education, personal, career, and social counseling, and access to outside referrals along with library/information services. Student learning is dependent upon adequate and appropriate support programs and services. The school is responsible for providing an effective range of integrated resources to enhance and improve student learning and to support the school's mission and expectations.

1. The school shall allocate resources, programs, and services so that all students have an equal opportunity to achieve the school's stated academic expectations for student learning and to participate in the educational program.
2. The school shall allocate resources, programs, and services so that all students have an equal opportunity to achieve stated civic and social expectations.
3. Each student shall have an adult member of the school community who serves to personalize that student's educational experience.
4. The school's student support services shall be consistent with the school's mission and expectations for student learning.
5. Student support and library/information services personnel shall be knowledgeable about the curriculum and involved in its implementation, evaluation, and revision.
6. All school resources for learning shall be regularly evaluated and revised to support improved student learning.
7. Student support personnel shall enhance student learning by interacting and working cooperatively with professional and other staff and utilizing community resources to address the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of students.
8. There shall be a system for effective and ongoing communications with students, parents/guardians, and school personnel designed to keep them informed about the types of available student support services and about identified student needs.
9. The school shall provide and maintain library/information services program and materials that are fully integrated into the school's curriculum and instructional program and are consistent with the school's mission and expectations for student learning.
10. The library/information services program shall foster independent inquiry by enabling students and faculty to utilize various school and community information resources and technologies.

11. A wide range of materials, technology, and other library/information resources shall be available to students and faculty in a variety of formats and utilized to improve teaching and learning and be reflective of the school's student population.
12. Library/information services shall include, but not be limited to, sufficient certified professional personnel.
13. Students, faculty, and support staff shall have regular and frequent access to library/information services facilities and programs as an integral part of their educational experience before, during, and after the school day.
14. Policies shall be in place for the selection and removal of information resources and the use of technologies and the Internet.
15. Student records shall be maintained in a confidential and secure manner consistent with federal and state law.

Conclusions

All students are required to complete core academic requirements necessary for graduation. There are three diploma concentrations in Arts and Sciences, Vocational Technical, and Business, but students are not tracked in those areas. Vocational students are integrated in the core classes with students of other programs who are working at their level. Students are able to choose from a wide variety of courses to complete their requirements and go beyond the minimum of what is expected as set forward in the school's academic expectations for student learning. In fact, the school offers opportunities that go significantly beyond what the learning expectations presently articulate. (self-study, student support services, handbook)

The student support services in the school afford equal opportunity for most students to achieve the academic expectations of the mission in several ways. The library media specialist instructs all 9th graders in the use of the library services. The guidance department ensures that students are scheduled for required core curriculum courses for all students given that the number of required courses has increased in recent years. Programs and services are in place to assist students who struggle with attaining the expectations. Examples are ninth grade teaming, screening meetings, and the Building Assistance Meetings process. Students may be referred to several resource people including the school adjustment counselor (school social worker), the school psychologist, and the student assistance counselor. The Taconic High School Juvenile Resource Program is used for any student suspended for three or more days. Six percent of the student body drops out in any given year and another small segment of students is placed in alternative programs. Although the school is aware of the high drop-out statistic, it needs to assess new strategies available to mitigate the problem. Discussions by parents and teachers are already underway to address the growing concern that the cumulative effect of the annual drop out rate means that too many students who start the school as ninth graders do not finish their high school education. By focusing on this disturbing trend and examining initiatives, the school can further its clearly evident belief that "students come first." (school support staff, survey information, self-study)

There are several unique learning programs to address the individual needs of some students: the Hibbard Alternative School for students who have exhausted their options at Taconic High School; the Adolescent Support Program for students who have emotional or psychological needs that exceed the scope of the high school; and the Teen Parenting Program for teenage parents. All of these programs are offered at off-campus sites in the city and have been creative initiatives by the school system to meet the needs of all students. (student support services, panel discussion, teachers)

Civic and social expectations are met in a variety of ways. Some curriculum documents specify ways in which civic and social expectations are met in those courses. Additionally, students have the opportunity to address civic expectations by working in the community as interns or attending leadership conferences during vacations. Some classes offer a community service component. Students also meet social expectations through involvement in “Mix It Up Day” (the students were asked to draw a colored disk and sit in the cafeteria for lunch with those students who drew the same color), peer mediation, and group activities in classrooms. The library media center is open during classes, and many students utilize it during their lunch period and after school. This affords an opportunity for students to interact socially and collaboratively. The school has initiated many programs to address the social and behavioral problems that students have within the school such as the Taconic High School peer resource program and the academic facilitator program. The peer resource program is a grant program that was cut to half time and is still in jeopardy of being reduced. Without adequate staffing, it will not be able to involve or reach as many students as in the past. (student shadowing, observations, student work)

Students’ educational experiences have become more personalized through the Academic Facilitator Program. This opportunity is still in its beginning stages and features small groups of students who meet with an adult staff member. More meetings are being held during the school year than when the program first began. Students meet with their academic facilitator to discuss their educational path, to select schedules and to share their experiences. However, the schedule has been undefined and takes 10 minutes from two classes. Teachers seem unsure when the next academic facilitator meeting will be held. This program needs to be more regularly and deliberately planned to meet its laudable goals. (self-study, teachers, school support staff)

The guidance and special education departments support learning expectations. When problems are noticed, a referral is made to the building assistance meeting, which is made up of the guidance counselor, teachers, and any student resource staff members appropriate to the referral. Anyone can be referred for any concern, and anyone can make a referral. Plans of action are devised to assist students in reaching their educational goals. If sufficient progress is not made, referrals are made to the screening meeting, where a decision can be made to evaluate the student for more intensive services. (self-study, teachers, school support staff)

Student support personnel enhance the learning of students through the administering of the guidance curriculum that is currently under revision. Curriculum and strategies are being revised to meet new national comprehensive guidance standards as put forth by the American School Counselor Association, the Massachusetts School Counselor Association, and No Child Left Behind. Guidance to student ratio is about 1: 280. As counselors attempt to meet the diverse

needs of students through new proactive guidance strategies, they are having difficulty meeting all the demands of students and families. Some students have attested to the open door policy of guidance and the ease of gaining needed assistance, while others feel guidance needs to be more accessible. Additionally, the new administration information computer system, Power School, is not easy to use, and the counselors have not been well trained, resulting in time-consuming efforts to use it. (student support staff, self-study, panel presentation)

There are no formal evaluation systems in place to evaluate the student support services of guidance, special education, health, or library programs. Establishing data collection and a means to measure effectiveness would lead to the affirmation and improvement of these areas in the school. The guidance department is in the initial stages of developing a data-driven evaluation system. It collects pre and post program surveys in an initial effort to collect data to evaluate programs. These are used primarily at parent-attended events. The guidance department is studying ways to collect better data to reach conclusions about the effectiveness of programs. These beginning steps merit continuation and should be instituted for all the student support services in the school. (student support staff, self-study, observations)

The recent financial difficulties of the district have caused the teachers and support staff to forge a supportive relationship, working together to assist the majority of students. The business and educational community are supportive through programs such as internships, job shadowing, college fairs, financial aid nights, and dual enrolment programs. However, the student support services do not show a direct link to the school's mission statement, and there is no assessment as to how the initiatives are affecting the outcome of the mission. More clearly stating the connection of student support services to the mission and finding ways to assess program effectiveness would better enable the school to evaluate and improve student services. (self-study, teachers, school support staff)

The school effectively communicates between the staff, students, and parents/guardians. There are monthly newsletters, and an open house is held early in the school year. When first quarter report cards are published, all teachers meet with those parents who are able to attend at night to give them the report card. Ninth grade teams are available one day a week to meet as needed with parents. Guidance counselors use the building assistance meetings to inform other involved teachers about concerns of particular students and develop a plan to address them. (self-study, panel presentation, teachers)

The library media specialist is knowledgeable about the curriculum and the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and regularly attends weekly department head meetings to assist in the evaluation and revision of the curriculum. In addition, formal and informal inquiries are made on a regular basis with staff and students to determine the needs of their curriculum and interests. The library media specialist has taken the initiative to utilize community resources to further enhance the academic needs of staff and students. She regularly consults with the local public library (Berkshire Athenaeum) and the Western Massachusetts Regional Library System to provide access to their materials through interlibrary loan. Over 250 transactions per year are conducted providing staff and students with print and audiovisual resources from community libraries. Online research databases are made available free of charge by the Regional Library System to all schools with a certified library media specialist. The media specialist diligently

promotes the use of these databases to all staff and students who utilize the library, but lack of computers hinders the effective promotion and utilization of this invaluable resource. (action plan, school support staff, self-study)

Insufficient funding for library media resources significantly limits the ability of the library/information services program to support the school's mission and expectations for student learning. The 9,000 volume print collection is insufficient for a school the size of Taconic High School. In addition, many volumes are considerably out of date, inaccurate, severely worn and in need of replacement. The library media specialist has taken the initiative to seek alternative sources of funding. A successful grant initiative has allowed for a significant addition to the fiction collection to meet the interests and reading levels of an increasingly diverse student body. The library media specialist has initiated candy sales to provide funds for attractive and functional furniture for the facility. In addition, the library media specialist has developed a comprehensive "Action Plan 2002-2004" to focus on improvements for library/information services, its resources, and instructional program. The current level of funding does not allow for much-needed improvement to be made to the print collection, library facility, or electronic resources. Although a wide range of periodicals and newspapers, maps, videotapes, audiocassettes, pictures, historical documents, the Internet, and special online databases is offered to staff members and students, many of these resources should be updated or replaced. Although staff members are encouraged to use the library media center, the lack of resources, both print and electronic, discourages greater integration into the curriculum. Only nine computers are available to staff and students to provide Internet access, word processing and the library catalog. The library media specialist routinely offers her own computer to provide additional access, but ten computers do not accommodate large class sizes and students on passes. Thus, students are limited in having adequate access to resources. (school support staff, teachers, self-study)

There is no formalized library services program to provide all students with in-depth instruction in the use and evaluations of the Internet, on-line databases, and print resources. Instead, the library media specialist provides all 9th grade students with an orientation to the media center at the beginning of the school year. Freshmen are provided with an overview of the resources, rules and procedures. Independent inquiry is promoted primarily on an individual basis when students utilize the library during lunch, after school, on a pass, and with their classes. The library media specialist recognizes the need for a formalized curriculum, but is faced with limited time and resources needed to design, promote, and implement a comprehensive program. As a result, not all students are knowledgeable about the extent of library services available to them. (self-study, school support staff, observation)

The library/information services program is understaffed. Currently, only one library media specialist and a part-time paraprofessional manage the facility for over 1,000 students. Sufficient paraprofessional/clerical support is not available to support the one certified library media specialist, hindering her ability to implement her plans to improve the program, promote online resources, and offer increased instructional services. (interviews, self-study, school support staff)

The library/information services facilities are available to staff and students throughout the school day, including both lunch periods, and for half an hour after school. Students without Internet or computer access at home are often in the library media center after school. Funding for supervision is needed to extend the after school hours. Access to the media center is limited to one class per period to accommodate students on passes and a large lunch period crowd. Lack of resources to adequately support the curriculum has been a significant deterrent to the use of the media center. (teachers, self-study, observation)

The current Taconic High School Information Resources Selection and Removal Policy (IRSRP) is in need of revision and the acceptable use policy for technology needs to be promoted and enforced. The school library media specialist has created an updated and comprehensive IRSRP document that needs to be formally approved by the school committee. The acceptable use policy for use of the Internet and electronic resources is in place but not strictly enforced. (self-study, documents, teacher interviews)

Student records are contained in secured files in both guidance and special services offices. The guidance department has locked files that are not fireproof. The special services office has one locked file, the others do not lock, nor are they fireproof. Thus, the school is not in complete compliance with mandated storage conditions for student records. (self-study, teachers, observation)

Commendations

1. The creative initiatives by the library media specialist in soliciting funds to improve the library collection, provide needed supplies, and attractively furnish the facility
2. The dedication, good rapport, and close working relationship between student support service personnel
3. The supportive service initiatives of the peer resource program, academic facilitator program, screening meeting process, and off campus programs
4. The progress of the guidance department towards implementation of a comprehensive guidance curriculum

Recommendations

1. Design, implement, and fund a plan to provide a wide range of materials, technology, and other library/information resources for faculty and student use
2. Provide the technology sufficient to accommodate an average class, students on passes, and the circulation station in the library media center
3. Develop and implement methods to collect data and evaluate the effectiveness of all student support services

4. Adopt a formalized library media services program to provide all students with in-depth instruction in the use and evaluation of the Internet, on-line databases, and print resources
5. Provide training for the teachers and guidance department in the use of the school computer program "Power School"
6. Continue to develop the academic facilitator program
7. Investigate and implement new strategies to reduce the dropout rate
8. Continue to revise the guidance curriculum to create a structured and sequenced program that emphasizes proactive instruction rather than reactive intervention
9. Provide adequate support service personnel for the library media center and the peer resource program
10. Ensure that all student records are confidential and secure
11. Develop and institute policies for the selection and removal of information resources and the use of technologies and the Internet

SUPPORT STANDARD

Community Resources for Learning

Active community and parent participation, facilities which support school programs and services, and dependable and adequate funding are necessary for the school to achieve its mission and expectations for student learning.

1. The school shall engage students and their families as partners in the students' education as well as encourage their participation in school programs and parent support groups.
2. The school shall foster productive business/community/higher education partnerships that support student learning.
3. The school site, plant, and equipment shall support and enhance all aspects of the educational program and the support services for student learning.
4. The school site, plant, and equipment shall be maintained to ensure an environment that is healthy and safe for all occupants.
5. There shall be a planned and adequately funded program of building and site management that ensures the maintenance and repair of facilities and equipment as well as the thorough and on-going cleaning of the facility.
6. There shall be ongoing planning to address future program, staffing, facility, and technology needs as well as capital improvements.
7. The physical plant and facilities shall meet all applicable federal and state laws and be in compliance with local fire, health, and safety regulations.
8. The community and the district's governing body shall ensure an adequate and dependable source of revenue to provide and maintain appropriate school programs, personnel, services, facilities, equipment, technological support, materials, and supplies for student learning.
9. Faculty and building administrators shall have active involvement in the budgetary process, including its development and implementation.
10. Equipment shall be adequate, properly maintained, catalogued, and replaced when appropriate.
11. School board decisions, policies, and procedures and district plans shall support the implementation of the school's mission and expectations for student learning.

Conclusions

Taconic High School engages students and their families as partners in education. Incoming ninth graders and their parents are invited to attend the Taconic High School First Day activities, including the introduction of teachers and department heads. At this event, parents are strongly encouraged to keep in touch with the school. Written progress reports and/or deficiency reports are sent to the students' homes at the mid-point of each term and whenever necessary. All families are sent a monthly newsletter to advise them of upcoming school events. During the 2003-2004 school year, via the newsletter, e-mail addresses of teachers were released, making communication with the school available on the Internet. Taconic hosts two parent conference nights. Each week, the ninth grade team welcomes parents to come to school to discuss student progress and address any concerns they may have with the teachers. Taconic also hosts an open house in February to showcase all course offerings and extra-curricular activities at the school. Eighth grade students and their families are invited to attend. As a result, parents feel informed about the school and feel welcomed to become involved. (parents, self-study, teachers)

Taconic High School has a full offering of co-curricular activities. Parents are regularly called upon to help with such activities. Parents serve on the local parent advisory council (PAC) as well as the advisory committees for vocational school programs. These support groups are an integral part of the school community. (self-study, students, teachers)

Through a variety of arrangements and agreements, Taconic High School fosters productive partnerships with businesses, community groups, and higher education that support student learning. This is accomplished via articulation agreements with Berkshire Community College, Springfield Technical Community College, and Hudson Valley Community College. Taconic is a member of the Berkshire Tech Prep consortium. Non-vocational students can investigate and experience the employment environment reflective of potential career pathways through Diversified Work Experience (DWE). In addition, Cooperative Education (Coop) is the capstone educational program, involving vocational students in jobs specifically related to their shop and classroom training. The school is a member of the National Academy Foundation (NAF). NAF sponsorships include members of the local business community. It is through their involvement that students from the Academy of Finance as well as the Academy of Information Technology are able to attend the annual Business Professionals of America Conference. Students in these academies have received numerous awards for their skill in both finance and technology applications. Thus, partnerships are an active component in the system linking students with the world beyond the school and offering them experience and valuable contacts. (self-study, teachers, principal)

The school site, plant, and equipment does not support aspects of the educational program and support services for student learning. Two surveys were administered at Taconic High School to determine whether the school's facility was of adequate size and included the components and equipment necessary for full implementation of the educational programs and support systems. Responses indicated that the school plant is thought to be of adequate size to support educational programs by most departments and support services with the exceptions of the art, guidance, math, and music departments and some parts of the vocational department and library. (principal, department chair, head custodian)

According to Massachusetts Chapter 74 state regulations, the carpentry shop must have 200 square feet of open space per student. This shop does not meet this requirement and needs a larger work area. There are safety issues in the vocational shops. The dust collection ductwork to the ventilation system in the carpentry shop is not connected. The eyewash stations in the carpentry shop are not working correctly. Originally built in 1969, Taconic High School has undergone no major renovations and therefore does not have to comply with current building codes. As a result, the electrical infrastructure has never been updated. In the chorus room, there is only one electrical outlet, restricting the amount of equipment that can be used by the teacher. There are five computer labs at Taconic High School, but only one lab funded by income from the school store is outfitted with surge protectors. As a consequence, most school computers are vulnerable to surge damage. These are only a few examples of the deficiencies of the plant and equipment in supporting all aspects of the educational program. (principal, department chairs, head custodian)

The school site, plant, and equipment are not maintained to ensure an environment that is healthy and safe for all occupants. The rigging in the auditorium has been determined to be unsafe and as a result, the stage has been condemned. This jeopardizes the performance of the school's variety show and spring play. In addition to needing new rigging, the auditorium has an electrical system that is not working properly and a sound system that does not work at all. Two of the five science labs have been updated, but the remaining three labs pose safety problems. Gas lines are not secure and workstations are unsteady and in danger of collapsing. There is no current plan to repair or maintain these labs. There are areas of mold on the floors of several guidance offices. The original heating system delivers heat inconsistently throughout the building with a wide range of temperatures being recorded. Due to a lack of Instructional Technology (IT) support, the computer system is often "down" and cannot be utilized. Newly enforced network privileges have rendered it impossible for staff members at Taconic to add new users or software to the network. This serves as a deterrent to teachers using the labs because of the amount of time entailed in having their requests for these updates fulfilled. Throughout the school the doors on the stalls in both the boys and girls bathrooms are either missing or in need of repair. Additionally, in the vocational school, bathrooms are not available for girls. This has reduced the number of non-traditional students who might otherwise access these programs. For all these reasons, students, teachers, and administrators agree that the school's physical condition is inadequate to support the goals and expectations of student learning. There is widespread belief that the present facility will continue without further repairs for an undetermined amount of time. Thus, immediate attention needs to be given to maintenance in order to minimize the adverse impact upon effective learning and teaching. (teachers, self-study, maintenance personnel)

The building and site management is the responsibility of the City of Pittsfield. The cleaning of the facility is the responsibility of the school. There is a serious and unacceptable lack of coordination of efforts between these two administrations. The Taconic school administration has a written procedure in place to request needed repairs and modifications through which a member of the administration fills out a work request form and the request is forwarded to the head of custodial services. If the custodial staff cannot complete the necessary repairs, the work request is forwarded to the head of maintenance for the City of Pittsfield. The head of

maintenance will either assign the work to personnel or reject the work request. The availability of staff and money determines when the work will be done. The City of Pittsfield provides administration personnel to supervise plant maintenance and supervision of the maintenance program. Annually school administrators and city personnel develop maintenance and repair needs assessments. However, the building maintenance department has no schedule for ongoing maintenance. Repairs are made on the basis of general safety, fire safety, cost, and need. The city council is the governing authority for the maintenance and repairs of all the publicly owned buildings in the City of Pittsfield, including the schools. Maintenance and repair requests are rarely granted. For example, the planer in the wood shop is faulty, and the instructors have the switch that would correct this situation, but they have waited for a year for the city to install it. There has been no response, and, therefore, this vital piece of equipment has been unavailable to the students. (self-study committee, self-study, administrators)

While there has been little evidence of ongoing planning to address future program, staffing, and facility needs, there is a formal technology plan in place that addresses the needs, costs, and strategic purchasing of computers, and it is reviewed and revised on an annual basis. Taconic High School has lost a full time instructional technology support person. This reduction has interfered with the use of the computer labs and individual computers throughout the building by the teachers and students at the school. The program used to track student data at Taconic is called Power School. The system provides web-based “smart forms” to collect data at the school and district level. The staff has concerns that the system is not user friendly. As a result, many do not successfully use the system, and records and data are not easily available. (self-study, technology plan, secretaries)

The physical plant and facilities are not in compliance with local fire, health, and safety regulations. The last time Taconic High School was issued a certificate of inspection was 1997. After a February 19, 2004 inspection, the Pittsfield Building Inspector’s Office and the Pittsfield Fire Department’s Inspection Bureau cited 31 violations, the majority of which were minor violations, were noted. The most significant of these violations included in the report is that the battery backup system for the fire alarm is non-operational, dryers in the team laundry room and culinary arts are not vented outside, and lights are hanging from the ceiling grid in the library. Taconic High School is handicapped-accessible and has accommodated handicapped staff and students. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts’ Department of Health and Safety has also issued a current inspection certificate for the Taconic elevator. Thus, some elements of the school comply with regulations, but others do not, leading to an unacceptable confusion of oversight responsibility. (City of Pittsfield office of the building commissioner, self-study, facility tour)

Sources of revenue for the school have been inadequate and undependable for the last several years. This has had a negative impact on teaching and learning because necessary textbooks, chemicals for science labs, and other resources have not been replaced. Twelve teaching positions have been eliminated in the past three years. Despite the lack of appropriate resources from the City of Pittsfield, Taconic High School’s staff has continued to provide and, when possible add, programs. Taconic is supported by the state budget and grants. Some of the grants the school receives includes those from High Schools that Work, Gender Equity Grants, Career Pathway Grants, and Perkins Grants. (self-study, principal, students)

Taconic administrators have an active involvement in the budgetary process including its development and implementation. There is constant dialog and exchange of current budgetary needs between school administrators and department heads. Taconic High School's building principal and vocational director decide how much funding each academic department and vocational program will be allotted. However, the Carl D. Perkins Grant provides allocations to support four Core Indicators designed to improve vocational programs. The grant specifies that vocational teachers, advisory committee members, representatives of special populations, post-secondary representatives, parents, students, and school committee members participate in designing the local plan. Vocational teachers were not involved in designing the local plan. Teachers are unaware of how decisions were made and how funds were allocated. The vocational teachers must participate in designing the Perkins Local Plan in order to comply with the planning process as outlined in the grant. (principal, self-study, vocational director)

There are no regular maintenance and replacement schedules or cataloguing systems in place for all furniture and equipment. The responsibilities for the maintenance and monitoring of equipment belong to various personnel throughout the building. The custodians are responsible only for cleaning the building. The technology department is responsible for the monitoring and cataloguing of computers, scanners, and some audio equipment. Individual instructors are responsible for contacting department heads for equipment within a department. Thus, there is no overall responsibility for tracking and maintaining schedules and equipment. (self-study, teachers, principal)

The school committee faces a very difficult situation. It does not own its own buildings and, therefore, is dependent on the city for maintenance and repairs. Furthermore, the City of Pittsfield has gone through a series of fiscal crises in recent years. Nevertheless, school committee decisions, policies, and procedures and district plans do not support the implementation of the school's mission and expectations for student learning. In fact, until there is a capital improvement plan or some other long-range strategy in place, the needs of a 35 year-old building will not be met and the learning needs of students will be jeopardized. Because the elementary and middle schools in the city have been renovated at considerable cost, there is sentiment that the high school will have to wait until some unspecified future time for the attention it needs. Townspeople even refer to Taconic High School as "the new high school," a term that belies the actual wear and tear on a well-used facility its age. Meanwhile, the faculty and administration of the school are hampered in achieving standards set by the Commission on Public Secondary Schools for meeting the learning needs of all students. (school leaders, school committee, self-study)

Commendations

1. The many opportunities available for parents and students to be involved with the school
2. The school's efforts to promote productive business/community/higher education partnerships that support student learning

3. The willingness of the administration and staff to provide additional time and effort to compensate for lack of resources

Recommendations

1. Increase the level of funding to provide the necessary staffing, support, and resources to develop and maintain appropriate school programs
2. Ensure cooperation and effectiveness between the City of Pittsfield and the school system for timely and necessary maintenance and repairs of facilities and equipment at Taconic High School
3. Update the electrical service in the building and add additional plugs as needed
4. Outfit all computer labs with surge protectors
5. Initiate and implement a replacement and maintenance plan for the equipment in the vocational labs as well as academic areas
6. Initiate and implement a replacement plan for new and current technologies in the vocational labs and science labs
7. Repair and upgrade the school auditorium to include the rigging, lighting, and audio systems
8. Provide for adequate, consistent heating and ventilation throughout the school
9. Provide the necessary instructional technology support for the maintenance and repair of Existing equipment and administration of the network
10. Immediately correct all safety and fire code violations
11. Attain and post the current certificate of inspection
12. Coordinate and centralize regular maintenance and replacement schedules and cataloguing systems for all furniture and equipment
13. Establish a capital improvement plan that addresses the modernization and renovation of the school with specific guidelines

FOLLOW-UP RESPONSIBILITIES

This comprehensive evaluation report reflects the findings of the school's self-study and those of the visiting committee. It provides a blueprint for the faculty, administration, and other officials to use to improve the quality of programs and services for the students in Taconic High School. The faculty, school board, and superintendent should also be apprised by the building administration yearly of progress made addressing visiting committee recommendations.

Since it is in the best interest of the students that the citizens of the district become aware of the strengths and limitations of the school and suggested recommendations for improvement, the Commission requires that the evaluation report be made public in accordance with the Commission's Policy on Distribution, Use, and Scope of the Visiting Committee Report.

A school's continued accreditation is based on satisfactory progress implementing valid recommendations of the visiting committee and others identified by the Commission as it monitors the school's progress and changes which occur at the school throughout the decennial cycle. To monitor the school's progress in the Follow-Up Program, the Commission requires that the principal of Taconic High School submit routine Two- and Five-Year Progress Reports documenting the current status of all evaluation report recommendations, with particular detail provided for any recommendation which may have been rejected or those items on which no action has been taken. In addition, responses must be detailed on all recommendations highlighted by the Commission in its notification letters to the school. School officials are expected to have completed or be in the final stages of completion of all valid visiting committee recommendations by the time the Five-Year Progress Report is submitted. The Commission may request additional Special Progress Reports if one or more of the Standards are not being met in a satisfactory manner or if additional information is needed on matters relating to evaluation report recommendations or substantive changes in the school.

To ensure that it has current information about the school, the Commission has an established Policy on Substantive Change requiring that principals of member schools report to the Commission within sixty (60) days of occurrence any substantive change which negatively impacts the school's adherence to the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. The report on substantive change must describe the change itself and detail any impact which the change has had on the school's ability to meet CPSS Standards. The Commission's Substantive Change Policy is included in the Appendix on page 51. All other substantive changes should be included in the Two- and Five-Year Progress Reports and/or the Annual Report which is required of each member school to ensure that the Commission office has current statistical data on the school.

The Commission urges school officials to establish a formal follow-up program at once to review and implement all findings of the self-study and valid recommendations identified in the visiting committee report. An outline of the Follow-Up Program is available in the Commission's *Accreditation Handbook* which was given to the school at the onset of the self-study. Additional direction regarding suggested procedure and reporting requirements is provided at Follow-Up Seminars offered by Commission staff following the on-site visit.

Finally, the members of the Taconic High School Visiting Committee wish to express their appreciation to the entire school community, staff, students, parents, and supporters for the gracious hospitality that was extended to the team during its visit to the school. The warm welcome, genuine cooperation, and frank communications were indicative of the common desire to support and improve Taconic High School.

**APPENDIX A
TACONIC HIGH SCHOOL
VISITING COMMITTEE ROSTER**

Dr. Dennis C. Carrithers
Chair
Connecticut Association of
Schools
30 Realty Drive
Cheshire, CT 06410

Nancy E. Guenther
Braintree Public Schools
128 Town Street
Braintree, MA 02184

Linda M. Merrill
Keene High School
43 Arch Street
Keene, NH 03431

Jeff Newman
Assistant Chair
Attleboro High School
Rathbun-Willard Drive
Attleboro, MA 02703

Nicholas Ives
Mark T. Sheehan High School
142 Hope Hill Road
Wallingford, CT 06492

Loretta Patterson
Weymouth High School
1051 Commercial Street
Weymouth, MA 02189

Donna Lee Blue-Tobin
Pilgrim High School
111 Pilgrim Parkway
Warwick, RI, 02888

Deborah Jordan
Walpole High School
275 Common Street
Walpole, MA 02081

Timothy J. Prouty
Tantasqua Regional School District
319 Brookfield Road
Fiskdale, MA 01518

Timothy Clark
Contoocook Valley Regional
High School
184 Hancock Road
Peterborough, NH 03458

David R. Kania
Seymour High School
2 Botsford Road
Seymour, CT 06483

Toby N. Romer
Boston English High School
144 McBride Street
Boston, MA 02130

Carol Faria
Plymouth South High School
490 Long Pond Road
Plymouth, MA 02360

Kathleen Laflash
Mendon-Upton Regional High
School
90 Pleasant Street
Upton, MA 01568

Sid Smith
Boston Public Schools
26 Court Street
Boston, MA 02108

Jeanne Lynch-Galvin
Chelsea High School
299 Everett Avenue
Chelsea, MA 02150

APPENDIX B

NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

Commission on Public Secondary Schools

SUBSTANTIVE CHANGE POLICY

Principals of member schools must report to the Commission within sixty (60) days of occurrence any substantive change in the school which has a *negative impact* on the school's ability to meet any of the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. The report of a substantive change must describe the change itself as well as detail the impact of the change on the quality of education in the school. Examples of substantive change areas include the following:

- available programs, including fine arts, practical arts, and student activities
- available facilities, including upkeep and maintenance
- level of funding
- school day and/or school year
- administrative structure, including the number of administrators and supervisors
- number of teachers and/or guidance counselors
- number of support staff
- student services
- educational media services and personnel
- student enrollment
- grades served by the school
- the student population that causes program or staffing modification(s); e.g., the number of special needs students or vocational students or students with limited English proficiency
- identification by the state as an under-performing school
- takeover by the state