

Westbrook High School Renews NEASC Accreditation

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WESTBROOK —

Every 10 years, a New England Association of Schools and Colleges Association (NEASC) school evaluation team descends on each New England high school for three days.

Their job? To review and independently assess the school to see if it should continue to be accredited. The team of volunteers begins with a review of the school's Self-Study, a self-evaluation document that identifies how the school's programs, processes and facilities meet, exceed, or fall short of NEASC standards.

In Oct. 2017, a NEASC Team arrived at Westbrook High School (WHS) for the once-a-decade on-site visit—and last week, presented its findings to school staff, parents, and elected officials, confirming that WHS's accreditation is renewed for another 10 years.

"The Self-Study found areas in curriculum, assessment, and instruction that could be improved. These aligned with the recommendations of the NEASC Team," said Principal Tara Winch. "In their verbal feedback, they told us they really got a sense of our school community, that our students feel safe. They said it was one of the most positive schools they had been in and that watching WHS students throughout the day was the positive evidence of this to them."

What were among NEASC's commendations of WHS? That the school focuses on developing a sense of belonging that reflects the district commitment to school climate; that the structures are in place to ensure the school curriculum emphasizes depth of understanding through inquiry, problem solving and higher order thinking skills in all courses and levels; that the use of the Teen Leadership class was valuable to support the social and civic learning expectations; and that the district is committed to providing staffing levels, instructional materials, technology, equipment, supplies, facilities, and the resources of the library media center to fully implement the curriculum.

Also winning a NEASC commendation was the district's support of technology; the shift in the school to an electronic portfolio system in which students store their projects, essays, and even artistic works, allowing them to self-assess and self-reflect; and the ample opportunities given for students to get extra help after school.

Where did the NEASC Team identify areas for WHS improvement or action? One theme is that NEASC reviewers wanted the WHS team to develop more formalized written procedures and processes; those processes, while there, were viewed as now more informal in nature. The areas the NEASC suggested should have more formalized procedures include assessing student progress to ensure the curriculum supports student achievement of all learning expectations. Also recommended was that WHS provide sufficient personnel, time, and financial resources for ongoing and collaborative

development, evaluation, and revision of curriculum with regular use of assessment results and current research and for collaboration across disciplines.

Winch mentioned two of the courses where cross-discipline collaboration already takes place, a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) class co-taught by the technology teacher and the physics teacher; and a History of Film class, co-taught by drama and social studies teachers.

Another suggestion was that the school district design and implement sustained professional development for teachers to expand the use of technology for a variety of instructional and assessment purposes.

With respect to school culture, WHS was commended for its conscious and continuous building of a culture that is safe, positive, respectful, and supportive; and for its formal, ongoing program through which each student has an adult in the school, who knows the student well and assists them. Also commended was “the dedication the principal brings to maintaining a warm and supportive environment for staff and students.”

Finally, the community of Westbrook was also commended for its “consistent and long-standing support of the school district’s annual budget as prepared by the superintendent and school board,” and for the partnerships that have developed within the community to offer students opportunities for internships and volunteering.

The final written NEASC report will be presented to the district and to the NEASC Board in June, 2018.