

LHS WATCH

Inside the hot, stuffy, overcrowded, Lexington High School



by Elissa Fan & Jessica Liu

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Elissa Fan & Jessica Liu are students at Lexington High School and reporters for [The Musket](#).

It was May of 2024, which meant MCAS testing at Lexington High School. Tenth graders were taking the test in designated rooms throughout campus, so other classes were reassigned to different classrooms.

Rachel LeComte's AP Economics class was moved out of the Main Building and assigned to the World Language building, one of the non-air conditioned buildings at LHS.

"It was blazing hot in there," LeComte recalled. Turning on the fan made it too loud to teach, so she opted to open the window instead. "I'm up at the board, and I turn around because the kids are starting to scream."

Hornets were swarming into the classroom, drawn in by a nest just above the window. LeComte, who had no prior knowledge of the infestation, spent the class block helping students who had been stung and shooing hornets out of the room. While a one-time occurrence, the incident points to some of the underlying issues that have begun to become more obvious as the building continues to age.

Heating and cooling systems

The LHS Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC) system frequently malfunctions, regardless of what season it is. According to LHS principal Andrew Baker, only about 40% of the school has air conditioning at all, and because each class has up to 28 students, rooms can get stuffy.

This becomes an issue in the summer and early fall, when "kids literally can't breathe," LeComte said. "It's really hard to concentrate or pay attention when it's that cold or that hot."

There are often issues with the heating as well; “even in the winter, it’ll be blowing super hot air that you literally open the windows to cool the room down, which is super inefficient from an energy standpoint,” LeComte explained. “We’re losing money and literally heating the outdoors.”

The issues with LHS’s HVAC systems make it difficult for students to properly engage with work and learn to the best of their ability. Cameron Tabatabaie, a world history teacher, noted that in addition to compromising his own comfort, “it’s hard to get even the most eager of students to be paying attention when the temperature’s 20 degrees out of whack.”

According to LHS principal Andrew Baker, fixing the building’s current HVAC system is estimated to cost up to \$100 million, and will likely not be fixed any time soon.

Overcrowding

LHS’s spotty HVAC system isn’t the building’s only issue affecting students’ quality of learning. LHS is severely overcrowded, a problem that becomes highly visible during passing times in the narrow corridors, when hurried students form crushing crowds in the worst areas.



Students changing classes at LHS / Credit: Daniel Kim

“It’s very sobering when you have to stand in a line for potentially several minutes in between classes, not moving at all,” Christopher Yoo, a senior at LHS, said.

Eamsley Chen, a freshman at LHS who earlier this year graduated from Diamond Middle School, described being overwhelmed by the stuffy conditions upon arriving at LHS. Unlike the middle schools, LHS doesn’t have enough lockers for students to store their belongings, so students carry their bags and coats around with them. “There are very tight hallways, and everyone has big backpacks they’re carrying around,” said Chen. “There are so many people, so the hallways are more congested.”

Yoo and Chen noted that crowded hallways often cause students to be late to class. Teachers, many of whom move between multiple classrooms, report similar issues, with some struggling to make it on time. Tabatabaie admitted that he sometimes misses the bell himself, leading him to be more lenient when his students arrive late.

But it’s not just the hallways that are crowded. Classrooms are packed with up to 28 students at a time. According to Baker, classroom utilization at LHS is between 95% and 99%, meaning nearly every room is in

use during each block of the school day. This leaves little room to add classes or new electives.

LeComte believes overcrowded classrooms also cause privacy issues. “Let’s say I have a student come up after class, and they’re having a health issue that’s personal and confidential that they need to let me know about. I have literally no place to talk to them,” she explained. “There’s no empty space that you could just grab to have that kind of privacy.”

Rebecca Zhang, a senior, also highlighted the lack of spaces to study, especially for upperclassmen, who don’t have designated study hall rooms during their free periods. “Right now, we only have the school library and ‘the commons,’ which you technically don’t even really have after lunch [when they remove the tables],” she explained. “It’s hard to find a comfortable place to study where it feels like you can actually get work done.”

Zhang also said she was concerned by the lack of cafeteria space. LHS has two common areas, each with its own lunch lines and seating areas. She explained that waiting in the lunch lines can take about “about 15 minutes,” leaving students little time to eat and relax during LHS’s 30-minute lunch periods. “It’s also hard to find space to sit because a third of the school eats lunch at the same time, but there’s only really two commons and outdoors only if the weather is nice,” she added.

Student morale



One of the main entrances to Lexington High School / Credit: Daniel Kim

Tabatabaie acknowledged that the facilities remain largely functional, but noted that “the building is not inspiring. It’s so old it’s a detriment.”

These conditions have started to impact both student and teacher morale. LeComte observed that the environment has made students less efficient and productive.

“It sounds nitpicky, but the surroundings add up over time. I think the actual physical environment impacts your brain and your mood,” LeComte said. “If you’re in a better place, you’re just more inclined to want to learn.”

It’s widely recognized that the state of the LHS building is far from ideal for students, faculty, and staff. What remains less clear, however, is how much taxpayers are willing to pay to construct a new facility.

“I’m not a taxpayer, and I understand the alternative perspective,” Tabatabaie said. “But it feels a little unbecoming of a town that is proud of its own prestige to not have spaces and a school that meet that identity

and that legacy.”

Pingback:

Lexington High School is old and run down. Here are some photos that show it. - The Lexington Observer

Pingback:

Special Edition: LHS Watch - The Lexington Observer



Hafsa Syed

October 18, 2024 at 10:37 am

Elissa and Jessica, your article does a fantastic job of bringing to light the pain points that students and teachers face every day due to the aging infrastructure of the high school. It's incomprehensible for anyone on the outside to truly imagine what it's like to learn and concentrate in such conditions. Thank you for humanizing this experience and highlighting the challenges with inadequate facilities. Many of us are rallying for a new high school for future generations, and your work amplifies the urgency of that need. Thank you for being the future leaders of our community!



Danny Watt

October 18, 2024 at 1:04 pm

To The Observer and my Lexington Neighbors and Friends:

The good news, I'm quite certain, is that vast majority of our fellow Lexingtonians agree that our kids, and our community do need a much improved learning environment than the LHS facility currently provides.

The challenge, indeed, is at what LITERAL price, and what can we bear? What is necessary, what is not? What is negotiable—in terms of those needs, process, contracting, and even the authority of the Mass School Building Authority?

Consider this: Suppose that cost estimates rise, reasonably, to \$750 million, for a new LHS to serve 2400 students. Doing the simple math, that's \$25,000 per individual for every single matriculated LHS student, for the next 50 years!

Not a penny for educators, administrators, facilities staff, let alone maintenance, upgrades, expansion... or learning materials.

For sake of comparison, and if my minimal research is accurate, the new State Street Building at One Congress St. (the old Gov't Center parking garage) was completed for less than \$400M. Granted, no build-out, but this is a downtown “trophy building,” with 1 million square feet of Class A commercial real estate. The centerpiece of HYM Investments Group and former Lexingtonian Tom O'Brien's Bulfinch Crossing, One Congress is 600' high, 43 floors (plus several below ground), built with miles of steel, hundreds of acres of glass, multiple high end elevators and other mechanical necessities. How can a new LHS possibly cost twice as much?

I am grateful to all who are doing the important planning work, as well as my friends who are advocating that we stay on course, and my friends who are urging that we not rush into what could be a painful, even divisive Override battle in less than 18 months.

This is Lexington. We are a Community of highly intelligent and engaged problem solvers. We have a record of leadership from the Battle of Lexington to Chap. 766 (Special education) enactment. We are (or have been) home to numerous Nobel Laureates, world-

changing scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs. We have long welcomed people from every walk of life, including many who need extra assistance.

We should be able to work together to create an outstanding Lexington High School facility without breaking the bank. Let's be bold, on behalf our community, and the Commonwealth.



Meg Muckenhoupt

October 30, 2024 at 8:08 pm

There's no need for "minimal research." A comparison of costs with other recent local high school projects by our Town's consultants is available online (link below).

To partly answer your question about why it costs more than the office: any building that is already completed had its construction funded *before* the enormous inflation in the costs of building materials and labor from 2020-2022. Schools also have a lot more legal requirements than downtown offices, we're building near wetlands, we're expecting to have 2400 students attend school in roughly the same area while construction is going on, and we're including energy-efficiency work that's going to save us a lot of money in the long run, but increases upfront costs.

If we delay this project, we will truly "break the bank" because we will end up having to spend up to \$100M on replacing the decrepit HVAC system, which is on its last legs, without getting a modern, efficient, building that helps kids learn. I don't think that's the outcome that our community of highly intelligent and engaged problem solvers wants for our children.

<https://www.yes4lex.org/helpful-resources>

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