

LHS WATCH

How years of construction at LHS will affect its students



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Permanent modular classrooms at Lexington High School in September 2024 / Photo credit: Maggie Scales

In 2018, Jess Holt-Carr's son, Nolan, was in kindergarten at Hastings Elementary School when construction began on Hasting's new building, situated just yards away from the original school.

Throughout that nearly two-year construction, Nolan and his peers continued to attend school in Hastings' original building, where "incredibly loud" sounds of nearby construction flooded classrooms, according to Holt-Carr.

"He was fairly young and he still remembers that [in] the classrooms it was really loud," Holt-Carr told LexObserver.

Holt-Carr said she, too, remembers the disrupting sounds from when she would volunteer at the school.

"There was a lot of dust and debris everywhere," she told LexObserver. "We've lived through construction and it's very stressful."

Future Lexington High School students, including Nolan and his classmates, will likely attend LHS amid its construction, regardless of which imagined concept the town pursues on Nov. 12.

Like the construction of Hastings' new building, some of the concepts the School Building Committee is considering imagine constructing a new facility next to the current school. Others would be more invasive — three concepts call for renovating the current school while students attend classes inside.

Kathleen Lenihan, School Committee member, told LexObserver that if the SBC pursues one of the new-building-on-the-fields concepts, such as "Bloom," students will attend the current school while the new facility is built next door. Maintaining a safe environment for students will be the town's number one priority, she said, and they will work to "institute noise mitigation when they can."

If the SBC chooses one of the concepts that envisions reconstructing or renovating the building in its current footprint, such as "Weave," students will also continue to attend school inside the building.

"It will be like living in a home while it's being renovated," she said. "That's a real challenge."

To meet demands for space, 48 temporary modular classrooms would be assembled on the sports fields as a part of the renovate-in-place options. Those "mods," as current LHS students call them, would be simpler than the permanent ones that are currently on LHS's campus — which students loathe.

“The freshman year mods are pretty hard to be in with the stark lighting and bad air conditioning,” Christy Gu, senior at LHS, told LexObserver. “Having to move from...an actual school building to...a modular or a temporary classroom would be sucky.”

Current LHS students told LexObserver they worry those temporary classrooms will affect students’ mental health in addition to their ability to learn.

“It’s pretty awkward to force a bunch of students into much smaller classrooms and environments,” Gu said. “[That] could have pretty detrimental effects [on] mental health and level of focus.”

“I think mental health has a lot to do with environment,” said Alejandro Castro Barrantes, LHS senior. “If you’re in a pretty crappy temporary classroom that’s really cramped for seven hours of the day, it’ll affect your mental health.”

Lenihan told LexObserver that Arlington pursued a similar concept to Weave when the town began renovating its high school in October 2020.

AHS is being reconstructed in phases and students have continued to attend classes in-person, according to [its building project’s website](#), much like what Lexington would do if the SBC pursues a renovate-in-place concept. Arlington did not, however, build temporary modular classrooms during its construction.

AHS administration has worked with the town’s project manager, Skanska, to mitigate disruption to students throughout construction. That plan includes reserving “quiet days” during MCAS testing and other exams where builders can’t make loud noises and constantly monitoring the air quality throughout the building’s operating areas, according to [Arlington’s blog post](#) on student impact during construction.

If the SBC moves forward with a renovate-in-place concept, Lenihan told LexObserver the school committee plans to reach out to Arlington High School’s administration to “learn from what they did to make it work.”

Between displaced schooling in makeshift classrooms and learning among the noise and safety issues that come with construction, Lexington parents are concerned about students’ experiences, especially those who have learning disabilities or sensory processing issues.

“For children that have attention challenges, how would [construction] impact those kids?” Holt-Carr asked. “How would you adhere to an IEP if the space doesn’t allow for that?”

A school's environment "makes a huge difference" in neurodivergent children's behaviors and academic success, Amanda Morin, a neurodiversity activist, speaker and author from outside of Portland, ME, told LexObserver. Increased noise, pungent dust and disruptive lighting can affect neurodivergent students' ability to manage their feelings and behaviors, Morin said.

"[Construction] can be really dysregulating," Morin, who is also neurodivergent and has two neurodivergent children, said. "It can really cause them to have difficulty sustaining attention and difficulty regulating their emotional reactions and physical reactions."

Holt-Carr's son and his classmates are poised to spend, collectively, about six years of their education in construction zones. In addition to those six years, those students also spent over a year learning remotely due to COVID-19 — that means over half of their education will have been spent in abnormal conditions.

Morin said current middle-schoolers have "increased anxiety and depressive symptoms," due to remote learning. And, **that "COVID-generation" is struggling to recover math and reading skills since schooling in isolation**. Learning in disruptive environments on top of those struggles likely won't help students recover academically or emotionally, Morin told LexObserver.

"I think about the necessity for them to develop those skills in an environment that is suitable for learning without distraction," Morin, who is also a former teacher, said. "If those [environments] are particularly disrupted by construction we may not see the developmental gains in math and reading."

Morin said that educators often burden neurodivergent students with adapting in situations like going to school amid construction — students will wear noise-reducing headphones or learn methods to calm themselves down. But, she said, "it could be really useful to think about how those burdens of responsibility don't fall on the students."

Lenihan said that regardless of which concept the SBC pursues, LHS administration will "put the needs of students first."

"We will leave no stone unturned in finding ways to mitigate the impact to students while they're there," she said.