

# **New England Association of Schools and Colleges**



## **Commission on Public Secondary Schools**

### **Report of the Visiting Committee for Darien High School**

**Darien, Connecticut  
April 29-May 2, 2012**

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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 Darien 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 days (60) 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 Darien High School in terms of 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 who seek voluntary affiliation.

The governing body of the Association is its Board of Trustees which supervises the work of six 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), the Commission on Public Elementary and Middle Schools (CPEMS), and the Commission on American and International Schools Abroad (CAISA).

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  
Core Values, Beliefs, and Learning Expectations  
Curriculum  
Instruction

## Assessment of and for Student Learning

Support of Teaching and Learning Standards  
School Culture and Leadership  
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 shows 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 Darien High School, a committee, including the principal, 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. In addition to faculty members, the self-study committees included students, parents, central office professionals, and board of education representatives.

### **Overview of 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.

The self-study of Darien High School extended over a period of eighteen school months. 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, Darien High School also used questionnaires developed by The Research Center at Endicott College 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 eighteen evaluators was assigned by the Commission on Public Secondary Schools to evaluate Darien High School. The Committee members spent four days in Darien, reviewed the self-study documents which had been prepared for their examination, met with administrators, teachers, other school and system personnel, students, and parents, shadowed students, visited classes, and interviewed teachers to determine the degree to which the school meets the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. Since the evaluators represented public schools, central office administrators, and the state board of education, diverse points of view were brought to bear on the evaluation of Darien High School.

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

- review of the school's self-study materials
- 72 hours shadowing 18 students for a half day
- a total of 36 hours of classroom observation (in addition to time shadowing students)
- numerous informal observations in and around the school
- tours of the facility
- individual meetings with 36 teachers about their work, instructional approaches, and the assessment of student learning
- group meetings with students, parents, school and district administrators, and teachers
- examination of student work including a selection of work collected by the school.

Each conclusion on the report was agreed to by visiting committee consensus. Sources of evidence for each conclusion drawn by the visiting committee appear in parenthesis in the Standards sections of the report. The seven Standards for Accreditation reports include commendations and recommendations that in the visiting committee's

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 which will make a decision on the accreditation of Darien High School.

### **Teaching and Learning at Darien High School**

The culture and climate of Darien High School (DHS) support a vibrant, positive learning environment where students are offered a wide variety of programs and supports to become successful, contributing members of society. Students are engaged, hard-working, focused, and open. Teachers are student-centered, accessible, knowledgeable, and committed.

There is a clear commitment at Darien High School to support high levels of student achievement in academics, athletics, and co-curricular activities. However, the connection between the very strong school culture and the school's statement of core values, beliefs, and 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations is not clear, since the associated rubrics for measurement are not widely used to measure student achievement. The intent of the standard related to core values, beliefs, and 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations is for schools to collaboratively develop these documents and use them to drive all actions in the school. The 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations must be widely understood, supported, and connected to rubrics. Schools need to measure and report on achievement of these 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations for both individual students and the school as a whole. At Darien High School, additional work is needed to clarify the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations and implement commonly used, school-wide rubrics against which student achievement of academic, civic, and social expectations can be measured. Measuring and reporting student progress against the expectations in a more formal, consistent manner will enable the school to continue to build on its many successes.

Students at DHS have a wide variety of course and co-curricular offerings from which to choose, and teachers and students generally feel that the school's schedule supports the delivery of the curriculum. While the district has a plan to review and update curriculum at DHS, the existing documents are incomplete, since they do not include the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. Increased attention to accelerating this revision will support more equitable opportunities for learning at the school and ensure that the taught curriculum is aligned with the school's mission and expectations for student learning. Teachers at DHS are generally quite skilled in planning and delivering instruction and are knowledgeable about their assigned content areas, but increased attention to connecting instruction to the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations is in order. In addition, support for improvement of instruction will be provided by a

renewed focus of administrators on providing consistent timely feedback for teachers as part of the supervision and evaluation model.

Teachers at DHS use a variety of assessment strategies to determine students' achievement of course-specific goals. The school has also designed and implemented some common assessments that teachers and administrators have begun to use to drive changes in curriculum and instructional practices. However, the lack of consistently used school-wide rubrics limits the school's ability to gather and report data relative to student achievement of the school's academic expectations for student learning.

### **Support of Teaching and Learning at Darien High School**

DHS is led by a strong principal and an enthusiastic administrative team who have worked well with teachers to create a safe, respectful learning environment where students are supported and encouraged to achieve. The school's schedule and course offerings provide an abundance of learning options. However, the school's academic courses are organized into several ability levels with a variety of pre-requisites providing substantial barriers to movement between the levels. Providing for increased opportunities for students to learn in more heterogeneously grouped academic classes would better support the school's mission and be more in keeping with current educational theory and practice.

Student support services at DHS are organized to meet the diverse needs of the student body. The positive school culture is supported by a variety of programs and systems designed to provide opportunity for students to develop and grow into mature, contributing adults. Attention to revising the school's advisory program will help DHS to maintain this focus on supporting students. Media and health services are both exemplary in their focus on meeting students' needs.

The well-designed and maintained school facility at DHS supports and enhances the educational program and provides up-to-date technology to support teaching and learning. A wide variety of course offerings, sports, clubs, and activities is available to meet student needs and interests. The school has also encouraged and nurtured student participation in a wide variety of community partnership organizations and co-curricular activities. DHS is a school with a safe, supportive school culture and climate where caring adults work collaboratively to meet the diverse needs of the student body.

## School and Community Profile

### SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY SUMMARY DARIEN HIGH SCHOOL

Darien High School, in Darien, Connecticut, is located in southwestern Fairfield County, 36 miles from New York City. A residential community of approximately 20,732, it is situated between the small cities of Norwalk and Stamford. Darien has relatively few office buildings and no industry; most workers commute to the adjacent cities, especially New York City. The household per capita income is \$94,953.

The racial and ethnic makeup of the town is as follows: 94% White, 0.5% Black, 3.6% Asian, 3.6% Hispanic, and 0.1% American Indian and Native Alaskan. In 10.5% of homes, a language other than English is spoken, either instead of or in addition to English. Over 75% of residents ages 25 and over have a Bachelor's degree or higher and 2.9% of the population (of all ages) lives at or below the poverty level.

The Darien Public Schools serve approximately 4,817 students – 85% of the town's school-age population – enrolled in seven schools: five elementary schools (pre-K-5), a middle school (grades 6-8), and Darien High School. As of 2009, 3.2% of the district's students came from homes where English is not the primary language; 6.2% percent of students were identified as gifted and talented; 11.4% (pre-K-12) received special education services; and 1.1% of students was eligible for free and reduced lunch. 91.7% of kindergarteners attended preschool, nursery school, or Headstart. The most recent data on 5-year enrollment change is 9.5%.

In 2009, the district's per-pupil expenditure was \$15,287, compared to the District Reference Group (DRG) average of \$16,163, and the state average of \$13,458. In the same year, 92.8% of district expenditures came from local revenue, with 6.1% and 1.1% coming from state and federal revenue, respectively.

In 2011-12, Darien High School educated 1,326 students in grades 9-12; in 2011, the senior class had 327 students. (Enrollment has grown steadily since the school's last re-accreditation visit, at which point 818 students were enrolled.) The ethnic, racial, and socio-economic makeup is consistent with that of the town. In 2008-09 the annual dropout rate for grades 9-12 was 0.2% (3.0% state average), and in 2009, 99.3% of students graduated. Among the class of 2011, 93.7% of graduates are pursuing higher education, with 86.2% attending four-year colleges. Of that same graduating class, 6.4% have sought employment or travel opportunities, or have enrolled in the armed forces.

As of 2011-12, there are 140 certified staff members, including three assistant principals, an assistant director of special education (6-12); an athletic director; a guidance director and seven guidance counselors; two school psychologists; a social worker; and two



speech pathologists. Five professional staff members have doctoral degrees and 126 have master's degrees. Full-time teachers are assigned between four and five classes each semester, depending on the discipline. (Science teachers, for example, teach four classes, but each class has a number of extended "lab" periods each rotation; English and social studies teachers have a combination of four classes one semester and five classes the other semester, which allows time for the assessment of student writing and conferencing with students about their work.)

In 2009-10 the average class size at the high school was 18.3 students (compared with a DRG average of 21.2 and a state average of 19.6). Students attend school for 180 days, with a total of 1,008 instructional hours. The average student attendance rate is a bit over 97% and the average number of absences taken by staff is 4.5 days a year.

Darien High School offers core-subject academic instruction in three levels: 200 (college-preparatory – skills) 300 (college-preparatory – regular), and 400 (honors-level and A.P.). All students are required to take four years of English, three-and-a-half years of social studies, three years of mathematics, two years of science, and four years of physical education and health. In addition, students have opportunities to take core-subject electives that are heterogeneously grouped (900 and 750 levels), as well as electives in world languages, fine art, music, drama, computers, business, engineering, architecture, woodworking, and more. Approximately 15% of classroom seats are honors level and 10.7% of high school students receive special education services.

The class of 2011 produced 15 National Merit Scholar semi-finalists; the class of 2010 produced one finalist and 18 letters of commendation; and the class of 2009 produced 3 finalists and 25 letters of commendation. In addition to these national academic honors, the school annually presents school awards for academic performance in all subjects, including salutatorian and valedictorian, and for school and community service. A number of these are "book awards" associated with particular colleges and universities.

Darien High School has also developed meaningful connections with local institutions of higher learning. Some students, for example, participate in the UCONN Early College Experience in Chemistry, and students enrolled in the Authentic Science Research course can receive University of Albany credit.

Starting in 2009-2010, seniors may elect to enroll in a one-month internship, in which they receive real-world work experience in various professional settings around the town and nearby cities. Now in its third year, this senior internship has forged strong partnerships with local businesses, professional offices, municipal governments, elected officials, and large corporations.

Darien High School also holds an annual Volunteer Fair, which exposes students to the many volunteer and public service organizations in the town and surrounding area,

including local nature centers, emergency medical services, shelters, and more. In addition to this, student extra-curricular clubs and organizations (including student government and the National Honors Society) hold regular fundraisers, food drives, and used goods drives to benefit local and national charities.



### **Darien High School Core Values and Beliefs**

*We, the members of the Darien High School community, believe that learning best occurs in an environment that is safe, supportive, respectful, and intellectually challenging for all students, one that promotes personal excellence through active, collaborative, and creative thinking; individual growth; and development of the skills and integrity necessary to become productive members of society.*

#### Learning Expectations:

Darien High School students will:

1. think critically, creatively, and adaptively while working independently and collaboratively to gain knowledge, to identify, understand, and solve problems, and to accomplish goals;
2. communicate effectively in multiple contexts and for various purposes;
3. develop reading and research strategies, observation skills, and aesthetic awareness through engagement with authentic, inquiry-based tasks;
4. demonstrate an awareness of multiple perspectives with a knowledge of and sensitivity to past and present cultural and individual differences;
5. value and demonstrate personal responsibility and ethical decision-making;

6. develop the skills necessary to lead a healthy and balanced life, as characterized by physical wellness, self-awareness, emotional maturity, and personal independence; and
7. demonstrate an understanding of civic rights and duties by positively and responsibly contributing to the school and larger communities.

*Approved by the DHS Community and the Board of Education*

**COMMISSION ON  
PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

**TEACHING AND LEARNING  
STANDARDS**

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**CORE VALUES, BELIEFS, AND LEARNING  
EXPECTATIONS**

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**CURRICULUM**

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**INSTRUCTION**

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**ASSESSMENT OF AND FOR STUDENT  
LEARNING**

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## Teaching and Learning Standard



### Core Values, Beliefs, and Learning Expectations

*Effective schools identify core values and beliefs about learning that function as explicit foundational commitments to students and the community. Decision-making remains focused on and aligned with these critical commitments. Core values and beliefs manifest themselves in research-based, school-wide 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. Every component of the school is driven by the core values and beliefs and supports all students' achievement of the school's learning expectations.*

1. The school community engages in a dynamic, collaborative, and inclusive process informed by current research-based best practices to identify and commit to its core values and beliefs about learning.
2. The school has challenging and measurable 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations for all students which address academic, social, and civic competencies, and are defined by school-wide analytic rubrics that identify targeted high levels of achievement.
3. The school's core values, beliefs, and 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations are actively reflected in the culture of the school, drive curriculum, instruction, and assessment in every classroom, and guide the school's policies, procedures, decisions, and resource allocations.
4. The school regularly reviews and revises its core values, beliefs, and 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations based on research, multiple data sources, as well as district and school community priorities.

## Core Values, Beliefs, and Learning Expectations

### Conclusions

The Darien High School Steering Committee revised its 2002 statement of mission and expectations to create a draft of the new statement of core values and beliefs. The committee solicited initial input regarding this new draft statement of core values and beliefs from the school's academic departments. The committee used references to Bloom's Revised Taxonomy and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as guiding principles in creating the statement of core values and beliefs. A presentation of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills – a "21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills Cross-Walk" created by the Connecticut Association of Schools (CAS) was also used in developing this document. The steering committee's draft revision condensed over thirty expectations for student learning in the 2002 document to seven new 21<sup>st</sup> century values and beliefs. Expediency and efficiency were cited as the primary motives for this early decision to develop a working draft in this way. The Darien Public School Board of Education, academic departments, students, and parents reviewed and contributed to later revisions of the final document. Stakeholder responses were also solicited and compiled through a web-based Wiki site designed for just this purpose. Although the revision was thoughtful, there was little direct stakeholder involvement and face-to-face collaboration and consensus building in this development process. Had the school used a more collaborative discussion process to update the school's statement of core values, beliefs, and expectations, all constituents' buy-in may have been improved. (steering committee, teachers, self-study)

Darien High School has developed challenging 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations; however, each expectation has, embedded within it, a number of essential skills, making difficult measurement of student proficiency against these expectations. The school has also created rubrics designed to measure student achievement of each 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectation, but teachers sometimes find these vague and difficult to use in connection with their teaching and learning. The rubrics outline targeted levels of proficiency, but the level of attainment associated with each expectation is not clear, since achievement is differentiated by how often students show evidence of achievement rather than through specific, measurable outcomes related to academic, civic, or social expectations. While the self-study says that these adopted 21<sup>st</sup> century beliefs and expectations "have been the subject of at least one homeroom activity, are posted in all classrooms, and are highlighted on assignments and syllabi as applicable", the teachers do not implement the beliefs, expectations, and rubrics in all classrooms. Thus, they are not embedded in the school's practices and culture. While the school community is committed to and supports educational excellence and social and civic involvement, students may not understand the necessity and the value of achieving these 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. (self-study, teachers, school leadership committee, classroom observations, panel discussion)

Darien High School's academic programs are uniformly rigorous, although the statement of core values and beliefs and learning expectations is not yet used to transform the formal educational process and the school's culture. The recently developed, school-wide learning expectations and their accompanying rubrics cannot be actively reflected in the culture until all stakeholders understand and are able to implement them. School personnel frequently assert that the core values and learning expectations are embedded in the academic program of the school, but there is no way to measure or assess this. Until teachers can use school-wide rubrics regularly across all content areas, teaching and learning cannot be driven by the core values and learning expectations, nor will it guide policies, procedures, decisions, and resource allocations. (self-study, teachers, school leadership committee, school-wide rubrics and 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations)

As part of the recent preparation for the NEASC decennial accreditation visit, the members of the Darien High School steering committee revised its former statement of mission and expectations to meet the new standards. The resulting document was approved by the faculty in May of 2010 and approved by the board of education on June 22 of the same year. Because these learning expectations were so recently developed, there is not yet a process or timeline to regularly review and revise this document. The lack of a formal process of review and revision limits the school's ability to ensure that its mission and 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations remained aligned with the community's priorities. (teachers, school leadership committee, teacher interviews, self-study)

### **Commendations**

1. The clearly-defined statement of core values and beliefs
2. The commitment of students, parents, and community and staff members to strong student achievement and preparation for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and living
3. The school community's commitment to social and civic involvement

### **Recommendations**

1. Build stakeholder ownership and commitment to the school's core values and beliefs by continuing to educate the community about how learning expectations connect to student achievement
2. Review and revise learning expectations so that they can be easily understood, implemented, and measured
3. Review and revise school-wide analytic rubrics so that they clearly differentiate between targeted levels of achievement and connect to what students should know and be able to do in each content area
4. Ensure that all stakeholders understand and explicitly integrate the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations into the daily functioning of Darien High School

5. Establish and implement a process that involves all stakeholders to review and revise the school's core values, beliefs, and learning expectations on a regular basis using research, multiple data sources, and district and school community priorities



## Teaching and Learning Standard



### Curriculum

*The written and taught curriculum is designed to result in all students achieving the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century expectations for student learning. The written curriculum is the framework within which a school aligns and personalizes the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. The curriculum includes a purposefully designed set of course offerings, co-curricular programs, and other learning opportunities. The curriculum reflects the school's core values, beliefs, and learning expectations. The curriculum is collaboratively developed, implemented, reviewed, and revised based on analysis of student performance and current research.*

1. The curriculum is purposefully designed to ensure that all students practice and achieve each of the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations.
2. The curriculum is written in a common format that includes:
  - units of study with essential questions, concepts, content and skills
  - the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations
  - instructional strategies
  - assessment practices that include the use of school-wide analytic and course-specific rubrics.
3. The curriculum emphasizes depth of understanding and application of knowledge through:
  - inquiry and problem solving
  - higher order thinking
  - cross-disciplinary learning
  - authentic learning opportunities both in and out of school
  - informed and ethical use of technology.
4. There is clear alignment between the written and taught curriculum.
5. Effective curricular coordination and vertical articulation exist between and among all academic areas within the school as well as with sending schools in the district.
6. Staffing levels, instructional materials, technology, equipment, supplies, facilities, and the resources of the library/media center are sufficient to fully implement the curriculum, including the co-curricular programs and other learning opportunities.

7. The district provides the school's professional staff with sufficient personnel, time, and financial resources for ongoing and collaborative development, evaluation, and revision of the curriculum using assessment results and current research.

## Curriculum

### Conclusions

Although some department's written curriculum documents reference the school's core values, beliefs, and 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations, most do not. This lack of consistent written connection between the core values, beliefs, and learning expectations is also true in the delivered curriculum. While 73% of staff members agrees that "the school's formal curriculum design ensures that all students practice and achieve all of the school's expectations", the organization and delivery of the curriculum may sometimes contradict this belief. For example, by assigning students to varying ability levels of instruction in the core academic areas (200, 300, etc.) and having inherently different learning expectations in such courses, the school may not enable all students an equitable opportunity to achieve the highest levels of the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. This becomes particularly difficult to measure when core values and beliefs and 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations are not addressed explicitly, but are "embedded" within the taught curriculum. Under the current informal system, there are often clear differences in expectations for student learning and performance within and across levels of courses, as revealed by examination of course descriptions, classroom observations, and student interviews. The observed curriculum delivery in high level core academic courses often demonstrates a robust presence of many of the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations, although they are mostly implicit. The lack of clearly defined core values, beliefs, and 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations in written curriculum documents and the school's organization of curriculum by ability levels may inhibit equitable access for all students to the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. (classroom observations, curriculum guides, student shadowing, Endicott Survey)

The written curriculum documents at DHS are built on a common curriculum template. Units of study within these documents often articulate essential questions, concepts, content, and skills, with individual units of study varying in quality and completeness, depending upon the latest revision date. The resulting inconsistent curriculum documentation means the taught curriculum may vary from teacher to teacher and students may lack opportunities for consistent learning through aligned instruction. The school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning objectives are not included in the most recent curriculum documentation. As a consequence, the explicit articulation of these learning expectations at the classroom level is not common, and students are frequently unaware of how these objectives are addressed through instruction and authentic learning experiences. Alignment of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations within disciplines and among levels of courses would afford a more equitable opportunity for all students to access the robust presence of each discipline's specific 21<sup>st</sup> century learning objectives. (Endicott Survey, self-study, classroom observation, curriculum guides, teachers)

The written curriculum documents also do not generally include suggested instructional strategies, as indicated in the self-study: “Instructional strategies are specified in only a few course descriptions... and are not required in the template.” These results in an inconsistent implementation of best instructional practices by teachers delivering the curriculum within each academic area, and it may limit students’ equitable access to high-quality instruction. Including appropriate instructional strategies within the curriculum documents for all subject areas and levels would result in the articulation of best practices by department teachers and a corresponding alignment of instruction that guarantees the highest level of engagement for all learners. (Endicott Survey, self-study, classroom observation, curriculum guides, teachers)

There are school-wide and analytic rubrics in some formal and informal curriculum documents, but the rubrics vary in effectiveness and consistency. When they exist, rubrics are most often written and used in the form of course-specific rubrics tailored to learning tasks. School-wide analytic rubrics are not currently part of the curriculum template. The resulting lack of consistent rubrics-based assessment hinders the teachers’ delivery of feedback and the ability of all students to understand what is expected of them. Teachers use the school’s curriculum documents as guidelines for instruction, and these documents define minimum expectations for each course and level. In practice, DHS teachers often adapt the written curriculum, 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations, and instructional strategies as they design daily lessons and units. These informal changes and continued need for revision to include specific learning expectations and appropriate instructional strategies limits school’s ability to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students. (Endicott Survey, self-study, classroom observation, curriculum guides, teachers)

The written and practiced curriculum at Darien High School emphasizes depth of understanding and application of knowledge, but academic challenge varies somewhat by course level. Higher-order thinking, inquiry-based learning, and problem-solving are readily observed in many classes at DHS. Classroom observations, student work samples, and the Endicott survey all provide examples to support the school’s claim that depth of understanding and applied knowledge are a focus for the school. In general, the curriculum is organized by content area, with few opportunities for cross-disciplinary courses except for the American Studies and China Exchange programs. Additional cross-disciplinary programs have been limited by the constraints of the master schedule, budget concerns, and lack of common planning time for teachers to organize them. Most curriculum documents do not articulate specific authentic learning tasks although, according to the Endicott Survey, 83% of teachers agrees that “the curriculum emphasizes authentic application of knowledge and skills”. Some elective courses, such as Advanced Journalism, Photography 2, the “Post 53” program, Authentic Scientific Research (ASR), and Contemporary Issues include opportunities for authentic application of knowledge and skills... Ensuring that written curriculum

documents emphasize depth of understanding and application of knowledge, cross-disciplinary learning, and informed use of technology will improve student achievement of the school's rigorous expectations. (teachers, Endicott survey, curriculum guides, student work, classroom observations)

The delivery of curriculum at DHS generally reflects a student-centered, rigorous program with high expectations for student achievement. In practice, alignment between the written and taught curriculum is not always clear and consistent across all content areas. While 69% of teachers in the Endicott Survey agrees that "the formal and the written curriculum align", many DHS teachers describe the written curriculum as merely a guide. As a result, students cannot always be assured of receiving a similar experience in the same course taught by different teachers. The self-study affirms that the "written curriculum varies {by} department, grade, class, and program". There is informal alignment of curriculum through the sharing of materials and learning tasks accessed by teachers through a common network drive, according to the self-study. The length of the curriculum review cycle (once every five to seven years) and the lack of consistent teacher involvement in this process hinder the school's ability to revise curriculum in a timely and effective manner. The lack of a formal process for curriculum alignment means that not all students are afforded the opportunity for an equitable learning experience. (classroom observations, student shadowing, teachers, self-study, curriculum guides)

Curricular coordination and vertical articulation between and among all academic areas within the school and with sending schools within the district is not a regular or formal process, except for courses which are taught at both the high school and middle school, such as world languages and Algebra. These shared courses have been aligned through common learning objectives. The implementation of professional learning communities (PLC) during the current year has provided some teachers with additional time for curriculum revision and vertical articulation. However, according to teachers, use of PLC meeting time varies by department. As a result, only some PLCs focus on alignment of course objectives, curriculum, and assessment. Departments such as music that align instruction effectively from K-12 often do so under the direction of one district administrator and meet as a K-12 department on a regular basis. In core academic areas which do not meet as 6-12 departments, high school teachers have only a limited awareness of what skills students bring to ninth grade in core academic subjects. The lack of curricular coordination and vertical alignment results in lost opportunities to ensure an effective, equitable, and efficient curriculum, especially for those students entering the school as freshmen. (district administrators, teachers, self-study, curriculum guides)

Darien High School's staffing levels, instructional materials, technology, equipment, supplies, facilities, and the resources of the library/media center provide excellent resources to fully implement the curriculum, including the co-curricular programs and

other learning opportunities. Observable class sizes (averaging 18-22 students per classroom) coincide with the reported class size in the self-study. An area in which staffing is reported as insufficient is in the library/ media center. The librarian/ media specialists take on multiple roles, from research assistants to free period monitors. Many DHS students spend time in the library for social purposes rather than for study and research. As a result, the supervision of large numbers of students may take away from the library/ media specialists' time and availability to aid students who need help. Both teachers and students believe that they are provided with adequate instructional materials to provide an excellent education. Some new textbook purchases have been deferred due to budgetary constraints, but most content areas have been able to purchase up-to-date necessary materials as needed. When necessary, departments have effectively reallocated materials to meet the needs of students. By using such technology as electronic books, teachers at DHS have also moved away from textbooks to deliver the curriculum. The limited use of traditional textbooks in DHS gives students the ability to examine authentic primary source documents and enhance their skill in using electronic resources. Teachers have used this shift from textbooks to their advantage by effectively providing students with learning materials which support 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. (classroom observation, self-study, teachers)

There is widespread use of technology for teaching and learning at Darien High School both within the classrooms and in informal student meeting or access areas. Some teachers encourage students to use their own personal sources of technology such as iPads. Nearly all DHS teachers use tablets for instruction, and these are replaced and updated as necessary. Interactive projectors are available and well used in almost all classrooms at Darien High School. Students and teachers are able to effectively communicate through student e-mail, the DHS website, the student information system (ASPEN), and the Turnitin.com website. Many students confirm that the availability of these technologies and the DHS website keep them informed about school and community events and activities as well as providing them with a link to their teachers outside of school. The school's exemplary use of technology prepares students well for 21<sup>st</sup> century communication. (classroom observation, self-study, students, teachers)

Overall, the DHS building provides well-designed and well-provisioned classroom space and other facilities, along with welcomed amenities like central air-conditioning. Flexible spaces, such as the Learning Connections rooms and two large American Studies rooms with removable walls, enhance instruction and student learning. Separate choral, orchestra, and band rooms provide multiple spaces for students to engage in music classes. There are also excellent private study rooms that are part of the DHS Library Media Center (LMC) where students can go for quiet space. The classroom layout in the building allows for teachers and staff members to stay in close proximity to the study areas and teacher workrooms, ensuring that students have regular access to faculty members and support staff members. The library also has sufficient resources to support student learning and implementation of the high school

curriculum. Students cite consistent access to the library/media specialists and databases as playing a valuable role in supporting their research and inquiry related to the curriculum in specific courses. (classroom observation, self-study, teachers, students)

The district provides the school's professional staff members with time for ongoing and collaborative development, evaluation, and revision of the curriculum, but formal time is limited and used inconsistently across departments. The school takes justifiable pride in its American Studies course and has allotted one period a day for teachers of this course to work collaboratively on curriculum development and assessment of student work. However, all stakeholders agree that there is insufficient cross-curricular planning time in other areas. Much of the collaborative development of curriculum takes place informally, both within and across departments as the formal curriculum is revised about every five to seven years. Although curriculum is documented in a consistent template and format, each subject area is in a different point in the revision process. Revision of curriculum usually takes place during the summer months, and the teachers cite the low rate of compensation for extra time as the reason for low levels of teacher engagement in this process. However, the school district also provides many teachers with professional development opportunities to assist in curriculum development such as the school's work with local colleges to develop a tutorial approach to teaching and learning. The district's support of teachers who wish to explore challenging professional development allows them to continue to improve their craft and better support the needs of their students. The assistant superintendent oversees curriculum development on the secondary level (grades 6-12), and, as teachers and administrators cite the need for more building-based professional oversight of curriculum, the school has asked assistant principals to take on stronger roles as instructional and curriculum leaders. Students, teachers, and administrators in Darien express excitement about a potential curriculum focus shift from content area knowledge towards "thinking" or "working" knowledge. However, the slow pace of curriculum development, evaluation, and revision prevents the incorporation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations into daily practice. There is also no consistent use of data assessment to guide curriculum development, with the exception of the state assessment (CAPT) analysis, a junior writing assessment, and the music curriculum assessments used to track student progress and growth needs. The inconsistency across content areas in formal teacher engagement in the curriculum revision process hinders the school's ability to meet the goal of moving from a content-focus toward a "thinking" focus. (interviews, meetings, self-study, classroom observations)

## **Commendations**

1. The use of a common curriculum template that features essential questions, content, concepts, and skills
2. The interdisciplinary American Studies and China Exchange programs

3. The higher-order thinking, inquiry-based learning in 300/400 level courses
4. The authentic learning opportunities in some elective courses, such as Journalism and the “Post 53” emergency medical response group
5. The implementation of professional learning communities that provide increased opportunity for teachers to align curriculum
6. The ample and varied instructional materials that promote 21<sup>st</sup> century learning
7. The effective use of technology to support teaching and learning
8. The instructional practices that emphasize depth of understanding and application of knowledge
9. The establishment of PLCs
10. The involvement of the media specialists in curriculum planning

### **Recommendations**

1. Include clear connections to 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations in all curricular documents and in all taught curriculum, regardless of instructional levels
2. Update all course-level curriculum documentation so that all curricular guides are consistent and fully support 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations
3. Incorporate suggested appropriate instructional strategies into written curriculum documents
4. Update curriculum documents to include high-quality, school-wide analytic rubrics
5. Develop more cross-curricular opportunities and authentic learning activities for all students
6. Develop and implement a systematic and timely method for accurate monitoring and vertical and horizontal alignment of curriculum
7. Provide time and formal structure for the alignment of curriculum between Darien High School and its sending school





## Instruction

*The quality of instruction is the single most important factor in students' achievement of the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. Instruction is responsive to student needs, deliberate in its design and delivery, and grounded in the school's core values, beliefs, and learning expectations. Instruction is supported by research in best practices. Teachers are reflective and collaborative about their instructional strategies and collaborative with their colleagues to improve student learning.*

1. Teachers' instructional practices are continuously examined to ensure consistency with the school's core values, beliefs, and 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations.
2. Teachers' instructional practices support the achievement of the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations by:
  - personalizing instruction
  - engaging students in cross-disciplinary learning
  - engaging students as active and self-directed learners
  - emphasizing inquiry, problem-solving, and higher order thinking
  - applying knowledge and skills to authentic tasks
  - engaging students in self-assessment and reflection
  - integrating technology.
3. Teachers adjust their instructional practices to meet the needs of each student by:
  - using formative assessment, especially during instructional time
  - strategically differentiating
  - purposefully organizing group learning activities
  - providing additional support and alternative strategies within the regular classroom.
4. Teachers, individually and collaboratively, improve their instructional practices by:
  - using student achievement data from a variety of formative and summative assessments
  - examining student work
  - using feedback from a variety of sources, including students, other teachers, supervisors, and parents
  - examining current research
  - engaging in professional discourse focused on instructional practice.

5. Teachers, as adult learners and reflective practitioners, maintain expertise in their content area and in content-specific instructional practice.

## **Instruction**

### **Conclusions**

Although Darien High School teachers are reflective about their instructional practices, these practices are not regularly and formally examined to ensure consistency with the school's core values, beliefs and 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. There is as yet no structured plan for deliberately and explicitly examining instructional approaches and practices in light of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations and their accompanying school-wide rubrics. Professional learning communities (PLCs) were formed during in the 2011-2012 school year. These provide a potential structure to enable teachers to examine their own instructional practices. However, the PLCs are not consistently used for that purpose across departments, since each PLC determines its own focus and activity. In addition to informal organization of the PLCs, some DHS teachers do not always receive consistent feedback about their instructional practices through the supervision and evaluation process. If core values and beliefs and 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations are not used to inform teachers' reflective practices and their deliberate decisions about instruction, students will have inconsistent opportunities to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. (teachers, teacher interviews, self-study, observations)

Teachers at DHS exhibit strong student-centered instructional practices. These instructional practices informally support the achievement of the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations through their efforts to personalize instruction for students. It is clear that many DHS teachers routinely adjust their delivery of the curriculum by modifying their lessons to suit individual learning preferences as well as adjusting their questioning strategies, assignments, and class activities to meet individual student needs and interests. Differentiated instructional strategies are often used to accommodate students' learning preference, and, in some classes, there is a range of classroom assignments to accommodate student interest. For example, biology students are asked to choose topics based on their personal interest for a project on the neuron. Students note that teachers are very caring and engaged, creating lessons that meet their learning needs and interests. Teachers often meet with individual students throughout the school day to help them with assignments and content and skills. Department learning centers and offices have been created to meet students' personal learning needs where students may receive help throughout the school day. Teachers also act as advisors to student clubs, to seniors participating in the internship program, and to students seeking independent study credit. There are some cross-disciplinary experiences in the curriculum, although this appears driven by student interest or through individual teacher initiatives. Art teachers, for example, engage students in cross-disciplinary learning by exploring the role of language and culture while also

developing students' technical artistic skills. The American Studies course and the China Exchange course are formal cross-disciplinary courses. Across all disciplines and departments, teachers engage students as active and self-directed learners, although this varies by course level and by individual student engagement and motivation. Many students engage in self-directed learning in science labs and mathematics walks. In the American Studies classes, students are asked to pose higher-order essential questions and write essays exploring the answers to these questions. Two courses are designed entirely around the concept of developing active and self-directed learners: Authentic Science Research and the IDEA Program (for gifted and talented students). Many DHS teachers in all content areas emphasize inquiry, problem-solving, and higher order thinking while applying knowledge and skills to authentic tasks. Some teachers, especially in the humanities, engage students in self-assessment and reflection, although this varies by content area. In science classes, rubrics are sometimes used for evaluations of a student's submitted work. Also, advanced art students reflect on their projects using a written form and must come up with questions to ask other students. English teachers often have students submit reflections on the process of writing along with their essays. Most DHS teachers integrate technology for communication, supplemental instruction and assessments, research, and self-directed learning. The technological components necessary for 21<sup>st</sup> century instruction and learning are recognized by all teachers and are supported by district and building administrators. Explicitly connecting these widely used effective instructional strategies to the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations will support improved student achievement. (classroom observations, interviews, self-study, student shadowing)

Most DHS teachers adjust their instructional practices to meet the needs of each student through a variety of effective practices. Many teachers use the results of formative assessment to adjust instructional practices to meet the needs of their students. In addition, many DHS teachers informally analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their students during daily classroom activities and modify their instruction accordingly. There is ample evidence across all content areas that DHS teachers use assessments to place students at the center of the learning process. Many teachers use discussions, partners or small-group work, or writing reflections such as exit slips as sources of information about student performance and understanding. These analyses contribute to teachers' knowledge of student learning, but they are not necessarily communicated directly to students to inform their self-awareness of learning. Additionally, DHS teachers use such measures as quizzes, tests, or summative projects to assess student progress or understanding of content. Some teachers regularly offer students the opportunity to re-take tests or quizzes so that students are able to demonstrate their understanding of concepts and skills. DHS English teachers provide formative feedback on students' written drafts in order to encourage improved communication. The science department has also begun to analyze and track data regarding student performance on laboratory reports. This data is used by teachers to address student areas of weakness. In the fall, the music department tests every student for basic music

knowledge and theory. Teachers differentiate their instruction based on their assessment results, predominantly through small-group instruction. Because of the constraints of leveled classes, this differentiation may vary only by degree, depending on the class level and discipline. Science teachers use small groups for labs; world language teachers use pairs or groups to create original comic strips and TV shows; English teachers use small groups for literature circles, peer editing, and book clubs; and mathematics teachers use small groups for summative and formative assessments, group projects, and to create original real-life word problems. The school culture reflects a universal commitment to supporting individual student learning. English and social studies teachers confer with students throughout the day in the English/social studies learning connections room. Similarly, students regularly receive extra help in the mathematics and science learning connections room. Additionally, teachers are available before and after school to assist students, and National Honor Society students provide peer tutoring after school on a weekly basis. By continuing to adjust their instructional practices to meet the needs of each student, DHS teachers support high levels of student achievement. (teacher interviews, observations, self-study)

Many DHS teachers, individually and collaboratively, use a variety of strategies to improve their instructional practices. While 83% of teachers cites the use of student achievement data to improve their instructional practices, the percentage of parents and students who recognize this practice and agree that teachers use data on student achievement in this way is much lower. Most DHS teachers use student achievement data from a variety of formative and summative assessment to adjust instruction, although this effort is informal and highly dependent on individual teacher initiative. Summative assessments like standardized test scores, especially CAPT results, are analyzed by the appropriate departments to assess student needs and adjust curriculum and instructional methods. The school also uses the TRAILS technology assessment tool to assess students' research and media skills, and the results are used to adjust instruction by the history teachers, who teach library and research skills. Instructional strategies like exit slips are often used to identify students who may need reinforcement or adjustment of teaching practices to improve student comprehension. Additionally, teachers at Darien High School examine a variety of student work samples within departments to adjust their instructional practices. These are most often found in the common summative midyear and final exams, which are used informally by teachers and departments to revise instruction. The music department uses a common assessment every year to inform instructional practices. While 56% of faculty members surveyed suggests that teachers have formal opportunities to examine student work to improve instructional practices, it is clear that this varies by content area. Teacher coaches are given a reduced load so they can regularly observe non-tenured teachers and meet with them about their professional growth. The school requires teachers to use student feedback reports for each class, and, according to students, some teachers also do a mid-year feedback evaluation. One student remarked that her teacher pays attention to students' suggestions and that she has noticed definite changes in teaching

methods after the feedback. Other students cite more informal feedback methods where they are regularly asked to let the teacher know what is working and what is not working. However, school-wide, only 36% of students surveyed said that their teachers ask for their ideas/opinions to improve how they teach, and only 9% of parents surveyed said that their son/daughter's teachers have asked them for their feedback about their instructional practices. About 61% of staff members surveyed says that teachers improve their instructional practices by engaging in formal opportunities for professional discourse focused on instructional practices. For example, professional learning communities sometimes choose to use collaborative time to reflect on and improve instruction, and some teachers are also regularly examining current research and using this to inform instruction or engaging in professional discourse focused on instructional practice. Although common department workspaces encourage informal conversation, few specific and consistent formal opportunities are available for this purpose. While it is clear the DHS teachers are using a variety of informal and formal methods to reflect upon and improve instructional practices, there are missed opportunities to enhance collaborative discussions about professional practices and solicitation of feedback on instruction from students and parents; these missed opportunities do not support active teacher instructional improvement. (Endicott Survey, self-study, teacher interviews)

Many DHS teachers, as adult learners and reflective practitioners, maintain expertise in their content area and in content-specific instructional practices. There is a high level of agreement among teachers, parents, and students that teachers are knowledgeable regarding their subject areas. Almost 93% of staff members, 89% of students, and 73% of parents surveyed say that teachers maintain expertise in their subject areas. Many DHS teachers engage in reflective and collaborative examination of their instructional practices although the process appears to be irregular. PLCs provide a vehicle for reflection and collaboration that helps teachers to maintain expertise in content-specific instructional practices although they are not always used for this purpose. Teachers regularly use student feedback reports, and students confirm that some teachers take the suggestions to heart and make changes in their teaching methods based on student input. Teachers, most notably those in the technology education department, sometimes team teach and join each other's classes to provide students with more personalized instruction. These actions on the part of teachers point to a significant effort to reflect on their level of expertise and instructional practices and to engage in discourse to remain current and relevant. Professional development support is another key resource in teachers' efforts to maintain their expertise. Historically, the DHS Parent Association has generously provided funding to support professional development and the purchase of research materials. Community support for teachers' professional development provided through the Sydney Reiss Fund and the Barbara Harrington Grant has also been significant. However, it is not clear whether the same level of funding will be available in the future. Teachers report that financial support for professional development is limited, and some say that the lack of substitute

coverage has limited opportunities for collaborative professional development activities. When opportunities for professional development are fully supported, they result in pedagogical enhancements that allow teachers to provide more intellectually challenging and student-centered instruction. (Endicott Survey, teacher interviews, self-study)

### **Commendations**

1. The instructional practices arising from embedded values and beliefs that promote and elicit a high level of student learning and success
2. The many classroom activities and tasks that reflect effective instructional practices
3. The personalized instruction at all levels that accommodates the many learning styles and interests of students
4. The availability of almost all teachers to provide additional learning support both within and beyond the school day
5. The use of some departmental midyear and final exams to improve instruction
6. The willingness of many teachers to engage in reflective practices and professional discourse about instructional improvement
7. The commitment of teachers to maintain a high level of expertise in their content area and in content-specific instructional practices
8. The financial support provided by community organizations for teachers' professional development
9. The opportunities students have to be active and self-directed learners with choices in some of their learning activities
10. The teachers' use of student feedback forms to adjust instructional practices
11. The effective integration of technology into classroom learning
12. The instructional practices that emphasize higher order thinking, inquiry-based learning, and problem-solving

### **Recommendations**

1. Ensure that there is a formal and deliberate process for all teachers to continuously examine instructional practices to consistently align them with the school's core values, beliefs, and 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations
2. Increase the range and frequency of instructional strategies to directly align with the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations of Darien High School
3. Provide a formal process for teachers to share their formative assessment results with students and encourage self-reflection
4. Increase formal opportunities for teachers to collaborate to examine student work and student achievement data using protocols
5. Increase opportunities for parent and student feedback on how teacher instructional practices impact student learning

6. Provide consistent formal opportunities for teachers to learn about current research in instruction and engage in professional discourse on instructional practices and discuss the results of their use in classrooms
7. Ensure adequate financial resources within the district budget to fund an effective professional development program so that all teachers can maintain expertise in their content area and in content-specific instructional practices.

## Teaching and Learning Standard



### Assessment of and for Student Learning

*Assessment informs students and stakeholders of progress and growth toward meeting the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. Assessment results are shared and discussed on a regular basis to improve student learning. Assessment results inform teachers about student achievement in order to adjust curriculum and instruction.*

1. The professional staff continuously employs a formal process, based on school-wide rubrics, to assess whole-school and individual student progress in achieving the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations.
2. The school's professional staff communicates:
  - individual student progress in achieving the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations to students and their families
  - the school's progress in achieving the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations to the school community.
3. Professional staff collects, disaggregates, and analyzes data to identify and respond to inequities in student achievement.
4. Prior to each unit of study, teachers communicate to students the school's applicable 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations and related unit-specific learning goals to be assessed.
5. Prior to summative assessments, teachers provide students with the corresponding rubrics.
6. In each unit of study, teachers employ a range of assessment strategies, including formative and summative assessments.
7. Teachers collaborate regularly in formal ways on the creation, analysis, and revision of formative and summative assessments, including common assessments.
8. Teachers provide specific, timely, and corrective feedback to ensure students revise and improve their work.
9. Teachers regularly use formative assessment to inform and adapt their instruction for the purpose of improving student learning.



10. Teachers and administrators, individually and collaboratively, examine a range of evidence of student learning for the purpose of revising curriculum and improving instructional practice, including all of the following:
- student work
  - common course and common grade-level assessments
  - individual and school-wide progress in achieving the school's 21st century learning expectations
  - standardized assessments
  - data from sending schools, receiving schools, and post-secondary institutions
  - survey data from current students and alumni
  - grading and reporting practices are regularly reviewed and revised to ensure alignment with the school's core values and beliefs about learning.

## Assessment of and for Student Learning

### Conclusions

The professional staff members at Darien High School do not yet employ a formal process, based on school-wide rubrics, to assess whole-school and individual student progress in achieving the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. The school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations and school-wide rubrics are relatively new, and there has been limited use of the school-wide rubrics to assess student learning in most content areas. In a few courses, the rubrics are used in their original form. More often, adaptations of the original rubrics' language and style have been used by departments and teachers. According to the Endicott Survey, in the winter of 2010, 53% of the staff members understood the process of using school-wide analytical rubrics, yet only 23% stated that they actually use them. There is also no formal process at DHS to measure individual and whole school progress in achieving the student expectations. The employment of a formal process based on school-wide rubrics to assess whole school and individual progress in achieving the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century skills would ensure that teaching and learning are consistent with the core values and beliefs of Darien High School. (Endicott Survey, teachers, students, student work, school leadership committee)

Darien High School's professional staff members do not formally communicate individual student progress in achieving the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations to students and their families. Although all teachers communicate individual student achievement through a traditional grading system, there is no separate reporting of student progress towards meeting the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. There is also no vehicle in place to report effectively the school's progress in achieving the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations to the school community. The communication of individual and school-wide progress in achieving the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations to students, families, and the school community would ensure the engagement of all stakeholders in the school improvement process and support student learning. (teachers, students, student work, school leadership committee)

Darien High School teachers collect, disaggregate, and analyze data to identify and respond to inequities in student achievement, but the timing and implementation of this effort varies by content area. The mathematics, science, English, history/social studies, and special education departments annually collect, disaggregate, and analyze summative data from the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) and the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT). The results of the data analysis have prompted the development and implementation of CAPT-style testing simulations in the freshman and sophomore science and mathematics courses. These formative assessments have then been used to identify students who need intervention. Additionally, guidance

counselors record data on the progress of students receiving scientifically-research based intervention (SRBI) support and, if necessary, adjust the level of support. The collection, disaggregation, and analysis of student data has helped support some student interventions, but lack of consistency in application across content areas has decreased the school's ability to adapt programs as needed. (self-study, meeting minutes, school leadership, student work)

Prior to each unit of study, some Darien High School teachers communicate to students the school's applicable 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations and related unit-specific learning goals to be assessed. Many DHS teachers implement syllabi and assignments that specify the expectations of what students are expected to know and be able to do, but the Endicott Survey showed that only 61% of students believes that teachers explain the learning expectations before each unit of study, and 44% of the staff reports agreement. Similarly, the self-study states that administrators expect all teachers to include the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations in course syllabi, rubrics, and assignments, yet there is limited documented evidence of this in practice. An exception is the history/social studies and science departments, which have consistently incorporated the newly-created 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations into individual assignments, projects, syllabi, and websites. The consistent and reliable communication of applicable 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations and related unit-specific goals to be assessed would support more comprehensive understanding of what students should know and be able to do. (Endicott Survey, classroom observations, students, teachers)

Prior to summative assessments, some Darien High School teachers provide students with course-specific or assignment-specific rubrics to evaluate student mastery of content standards. According to the Endicott Survey, 74% of students understands in advance what work they have to accomplish to meet their teachers' expectations. The majority of students states that their teachers use rubrics to assess their work, and 79% of students affirm that they understand the rubrics their teachers use. In several content areas, teachers differentiate measures of learning through product choice, and the most effective rubrics offer a consistent tool for evaluation of student understanding, knowledge, and skills while also communicating to students the explicit learning expectations. The consistent and universal use of rubrics prior to summative assessments would ensure that students understand what they should understand, know, and be able to do. (student work, classroom observations, teachers, students, self-study, Endicott Survey)

Many Darien High School teachers employ a wide range of assessment strategies, including formative and summative assessments. According to the Endicott Survey, 92% of teachers reports that they use a variety and range of assessment strategies, including formative and summative assessment. There is effective use of formative assessment practices in classes at DHS. Teachers check for understanding using discussion, short written questions, problems, and small group work. Formative

assessments drive instruction through such methods as exit slips, diagnostic assessments, quizzes, experiments, writing prompts, and research activities. Some consistent modes of summative assessments include traditional course exams, formal essays, presentations, and papers. Although the self-study articulates a limited range of summative assessment strategies, the school has exhibited much growth in this area over the last year, as the provided samples of work contain a wide range of summative assessment tools. For example, English teachers offer project choice as a summative unit assessment including the creation of a blog, a song, a soliloquy, or a scene from a play. World language teachers' summative assessments include the creation of interviews, oral presentations, student-generated study guides, and dialogues on contemporary issues. Employing a wider range of assessment strategies and functions will ensure students' learning is more thoroughly assessed in light of their learning preferences. (student work, classroom observations, teachers, students, self-study)

Some teachers at Darien High School collaborate in formal ways on the creation, analysis, and revision of formative and summative assessments, including common assessments. More frequently, department members have informally collaborated to create some common assessments, typically common midterm and final exams. Recently, this practice has become more formal, taking place during scheduled professional learning communities (PLC) meetings in some content areas and through professional development activities dedicated to developing common assessments. For example, through the efforts of an interdisciplinary team of several biology teachers and a physics teacher, four common inquiry-based labs were created to inform instruction in biology and to measure inquiry skills over the course of freshman year in science classes. Similarly, the music department has created vertically aligned common assessments. The resulting assessment data is used to make instructional decisions, although these assessments have yet to be revised. Anchor writing tasks have been collaboratively created for English classes and are often assessed using an adapted, departmentally developed rubric. Additionally, PLCs have enabled English teachers to more consistently calibrate grading of common assignments. Science teachers have also collaboratively used item error analysis to reflect upon common exams and make improvements. Regular and formal teacher collaboration to create, analyze, and revise common formative and summative assessments will create a richer, more consistent understanding of what students know and are able to do. (teachers, district administrators, meeting minutes, student work)

Many DHS teachers provide specific, timely, and corrective feedback to ensure that students revise and improve their work. Various modes of corrective feedback are shared with students, and the use of technology, including e-mail, edits with Microsoft Word tracked changes, and Turnitin.com enhance the process. Additionally, immediate feedback during lessons, class work, and one-on-one support provides students with many opportunities to improve their work. In some basic (200 level) math classes, traditional assessments are returned to students for revision, alone or in groups, for

resubmission and assessment. According to the Endicott Survey, 69% of students believes that teachers assess and correct their work within a reasonable amount of time. Continued consistent, specific, timely, and corrective feedback of student revisions, and consistent improvements of their work will ensure that the school supports improved student achievement and will teach students how assessment is part of the learning process (student work, teacher interviews, classroom observations, self-study, Endicott Survey)

Many Darien High School teachers use the results of their formative assessments to adapt their instructional strategies within a lesson or prior to the next lesson in order to improve student learning, but this strategy is inconsistently applied across all content areas. Formative assessments are used by individual teachers in a variety of ways. A math teacher uses warm-ups and “do nows” at the beginning of some classes as a starting place for lessons. An English teacher reports using formative assessments on an introductory topic to create heterogeneous groups for an activity. A wide variety of questioning techniques and responses is used throughout lessons across disciplines to immediately inform instruction. The thoughtful, deliberate and more frequent use of formative assessments to inform and adapt instruction improves student understanding and learning. (student work, teacher interviews, self-study, classroom observations, Endicott Survey)

DHS teachers and administrators, individually and collectively, examine student learning for the purpose of revising curriculum and improving instructional practice. Standardized test scores have been examined in order to drive instruction and curriculum in math and science classes. Recent CAPT data was analyzed by the appropriate departments and areas of weakness were identified. Instruction was modified to address weaknesses of students both individually and collectively. Data from sending schools is used to determine level and course placement in several subject areas, but it is not clear how the information is used to inform instruction or curriculum. Similarly, while student work and common course assessments are examined, it is not yet clear how the analysis affects curriculum and assessment revisions. Finally, individual and school-wide progress in achieving the school’s 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations is not produced using school-wide analytic rubrics and collected and examined in an explicit and deliberate manner. Individually and collectively examining evidence of student learning for the purpose of revising curriculum and improving instructional practice would promote increased student learning. (student work, self-study, guidance alumni survey, district administrators)

Grading and reporting practices have not yet been reviewed and revised to ensure alignment with the school core values and beliefs about learning. In 2009 Darien High School changed its grade reporting practices through the implementation of a student information management system, ASPEN. Teachers report that ASPEN allows for clear communication to parents and students regarding student progress and attendance.

However, it is not clear that all teachers have learned to use all of the components of this information management system or that it explicitly reflects alignment with school core values and beliefs about learning. Teachers often refer to the rubrics they use in class as embodying the “essence” or the “spirit” of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations and their accompanying school-wide rubrics. They believe that by embedding the “essence” of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations in numerical grade averages they can report these in a traditional grade report. According to the self-study report, teachers and parents are content with this practice, and there are “no plans to change” the grading and reporting practices. Separate reporting of progress on school-wide learning expectations and any form of benchmark skill assessments is not currently being considered. The thoughtful and explicit review and revision of grading and report practices would ensure a greater alignment with the school’s core values and beliefs about learning, as well as the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. (self-study, teachers, students, student work, assessment sub-committee)

### **Commendations**

1. The use of technology to communicate student progress in a timely fashion
2. The inclusion of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations and unit-specific expectations of what students should know and be able to do in some courses
3. The expanding range of assessment strategies in use school-wide
4. The common summative exams used in many courses
5. The use of data analysis to revise and inform changes in instruction
6. Teachers’ efforts to provide specific, timely, and corrective feedback to students
7. The variety of methods used to provide feedback to students about their work
8. The use of assessment results/date to inform changes in instructional practices

### **Recommendations**

1. Investigate, design, and implement a process for tracking and reporting student learning in alignment with DHS’s core values and beliefs
2. Develop and implement a formal process to assess whole-school and individual student progress in achieving the school’s 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations
3. Create and implement additional common formative assessments and use the results to respond to inequities in student achievement
4. Analyze data from common formative assessments to inform instruction in all content areas
5. Explicitly communicate 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations to students
6. Examine data collected from common formative assessments and student work to guide collaborative curriculum decisions in a purposeful and deliberate manner.

7. Document and report individual and school-wide progress toward meeting the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations over time

## **SUPPORT STANDARDS**

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**SCHOOL CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP**

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**SCHOOL RESOURCES FOR LEARNING**

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**COMMUNITY RESOURCES FOR LEARNING**

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## Support Standard



### School Culture and Leadership

*The school culture is equitable and inclusive, and it embodies the school's foundational core values and beliefs about student learning. It is characterized by reflective, collaborative, and constructive dialogue about research-based practices that support high expectations for the learning of all students. The leadership of the school fosters a safe, positive culture by promoting learning, cultivating shared leadership, and engaging all members of the school community in efforts to improve teaching and learning.*

1. The school community consciously and continuously builds a safe, positive, respectful, and supportive culture that fosters student responsibility for learning and results in shared ownership, pride, and high expectations for all.
2. The school is equitable, inclusive, and fosters heterogeneity where every student over the course of the high school experience is enrolled in a minimum of one heterogeneously grouped core course (English/language arts, social studies, math, science, or world languages).
3. There is a formal, ongoing program through which each student has an adult in the school, in addition to the school counselor, who knows the student well and assists the student in achieving the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations.
4. In order to improve student learning through professional development, the principal and professional staff:
  - engage in professional discourse for reflection, inquiry, and analysis of teaching and learning
  - use resources outside of the school to maintain currency with best practices
  - dedicate formal time to implement professional development
  - apply the skills, practices, and ideas gained in order to improve curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
5. School leaders regularly use research-based evaluation and supervision processes that focus on improved student learning.
6. The organization of time supports research-based instruction, professional collaboration among teachers, and the learning needs of all students.
7. Student load and class size enable teachers to meet the learning needs of individual students.

8. The principal, working with other building leaders, provides instructional leadership that is rooted in the school's core values, beliefs, and learning expectations.
9. Teachers, students, and parents are involved in meaningful and defined roles in decision-making that promote responsibility and ownership.
10. Teachers exercise initiative and leadership essential to the improvement of the school and to increase students' engagement in learning.
11. The school board, superintendent, and principal are collaborative, reflective, and constructive in achieving the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations.
12. The school board and superintendent provide the principal with sufficient decision-making authority to lead the school.

## School Culture and Leadership

### Conclusions

Darien High School provides a positive learning environment with high expectations for all students that is enthusiastically supported by all the stakeholders in the community. The school community consciously and continuously builds a safe, positive, respectful, and supportive culture that fosters student responsibility for learning and results in shared ownership, pride, and high expectations for all. The school is characterized by a high level of parent involvement, passionate and motivated students, and dedicated teachers who lead effective instruction. The Endicott Survey results verify that students, families, and staff members share this sense of a safe and supportive DHS culture. The school's recently crafted core values and learning expectations also reflect this commitment to safety and personal responsibility evident in the culture of the school. Students share responsibility for communicating these values. For example, The Art for Action club created vibrant posters and t-shirts graphically representing the seven core values to bring awareness of these values to the school community. This same club has been helpful in promoting a sense of pride for athletic teams in the school and allowing students the means to express themselves in a variety of contexts. There are many clubs, activities, athletic teams, and courses where students convey their evident pride in their school. Many students also speak of the school's wide variety of extracurricular activities that celebrate their success as unique individuals. Student handbooks and clear teacher expectations in classrooms help support personal responsibility in students at DHS. The newly implemented ASPEN student information system has been instrumental in fostering student responsibility by enabling teachers to communicate grade information to students and parents in a timely manner. Students observe that they feel there is a great deal of physical freedom around the Darien campus, but with that independence comes a high expectation of responsibility. Students mirror the teachers in that independence and freedom of pedagogy has been encouraged and supported by the administration and community. A school community that fosters mutual respect and student responsibility for learning while providing a safe, positive, and supportive culture ensures a sense of pride, shared ownership, and high expectations for all. (students, teachers, Endicott Survey, facility tour, observations)

While the school holds students and teachers to high academic standards, equitable access to inclusive and heterogeneous course offerings is not guaranteed to all students over the course of their high school experience. Although most students at DHS are enrolled in one heterogeneously grouped core academic course, the freshman Western Civilizations course, the structure of most course offerings is organized into at least three ability levels, and this appears to be used as means for "tracking" students. The Western Civilization course, for example, has a total of 400 enrolled freshmen including 370 students in the 300-level and 30 students in the 200-level. The 400-level courses are

advanced placement/honors level and have rigorous prerequisites; 300-level courses are classified as a college preparation level, with fewer prerequisites; 200-level courses are smaller in size and offer students more individual attention. Two additional levels exist, 900-level (primarily electives) and 750-level (theatre, music, and art) both requiring few, if any, prerequisites. Of all these levels, the 300-level **offers** the greatest opportunity for heterogeneity for the core subjects. Most advanced placement (AP) level courses are open only to students who have taken the honors placement exam, and a few of the newer AP courses offer “open enrollment”. While the Western Civilization course has only two discrete levels, this is not an assurance that all students will experience a heterogeneously grouped class with their peers of various academic abilities. The school’s academic ability grouping system delineating course levels inhibits the equitable, inclusive, heterogeneous learning opportunities of every student. (self-study, students, handbook, teachers, assessment sub-committee)

There is a newly created advisory-type program in place at DHS, but this initiative does not always ensure each student has an adult in the school, in addition to the school counselor, who knows the student well while assisting the student in achieving the school’s learning expectations. The recently implemented DHS homeroom advisory period meets biweekly for 20 minutes in a special homeroom schedule. This time allows each student to meet with one adult on a regular and formal basis. However, the format of this homeroom advisory is structured around specific topics, and students and teachers are assigned to one another, not by interest or inclination, but by alphabet. Additionally, teachers say that the 20-minute time frame is too short for meaningful relationship-building. These factors prevent teachers from getting to know students well enough through advisory to build trust, create meaningful relationships, and to discuss the school’s learning expectations. On an informal level, most students agree that they have at least one teacher in addition to their school counselor from whom to seek advice and guidance on personal or academic issues, but it is not generally the homeroom advisor. A formal, effective advisory program with a curriculum based on support for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations would provide students with the opportunity to connect with an adult member of the school who would help the student achieve the school’s learning expectations. (self-study, students, teachers, student shadowing)

In order to improve student learning through professional development, the principal and professional staff engage in professional discourse for reflection, inquiry, and analysis of teaching and learning. Resources outside of the school are often used to maintain currency with best practices, and formal time is dedicated to implement professional development and apply the skills, practices, and ideas gained in order to improve curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The recent implementation of professional learning communities (PLCs) involves eight, annual, 90-minute meetings for professional and departmental collaboration. Teachers say that these meetings are not meaningful as they are not frequent enough to provide the opportunity for effective

reflection, inquiry, and analysis of teaching and learning. Collaboration within departments varies, and teachers have the opportunity to select from various areas of interest within the PLC format although the key focus is meant to be on instruction. In addition, the school district provides and funds five staff professional development days as well as opportunities to attend workshops and conferences outside of school. According to the self-study, however, funding for staff development outside of school has been inconsistent. Also, Endicott Survey results show that only 46% of the faculty members believes that the DHS professional development program enables teachers to acquire and use skills to improve instruction and assessment. However, professional development in the use of technology has had the greatest impact on instructional practices as both teachers and students are able to use and integrate technology effectively into the classroom. Improved teaching and learning can be effected through a formal professional development plan that engages faculty members in professional discourse, utilizes external resources, and can be applied toward the improvement of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. (Endicott Survey, central office administrators, teachers)

School leaders use evaluation and supervision processes at both a formal and informal level, but this process does not always support improved student learning. The self-study describes how DHS administrators are assigned a pool of faculty members to supervise, and these administrators follow procedures in the DHS Teacher Evaluation Plan. Although the self-study reports that evaluators are following proper protocol in relation to teacher evaluations, teacher interviews suggest that the implementation of evaluations is not optimally effective and timely, especially in relation to tenured teachers. Some tenured teachers remark that they have not been formally observed for a number of years. There is also insufficient documentation of teacher observation schedules in the supporting evidence supplied by the NEASC steering committee. Administrators explain that this perception that teacher evaluations are infrequent and ineffective may be a communication problem between the evaluators and their respective teachers. Recently, in the evaluation process, there has been an emphasis placed on the teachers' implementation of learner-centered instruction and integration of student work and learning goals. However, there is insufficient data available to establish a link between these evaluations and student learning outcomes. There is also a teacher coaching program currently in place, and the self-study reports this is not consistently applied to support instructional improvement. The school's ability to assess improvement of instructional practices and student learning outcomes is impaired when the evaluation process is not implemented effectively and consistently. (teachers, staff members, self-study)

During the course of the school day, the schedule of the school supports research-based instruction, formal and informal collaboration among teachers, and the learning needs of all students. Teachers have adequate prep periods each day during which they can meet with students or informally collaborate with colleagues. In most departments,

there is a rich culture of teacher collaboration for the majority of teachers in the school during these overlapping prep times in shared office spaces. The American Studies course also pairs English and history teachers each day in a dedicated collaborative time built into the structure of the course. This common time for collaboration allows these specific teachers to align learning objectives and common activities and to share and evaluate student work. The organization of the daily school schedule and school calendar changes to accommodate PLCs help to create opportunities to support teacher collaboration to focus on measurable learning objectives and the needs of all students. (self-study, teachers, central office administrators)

Student load and class sizes at DHS enable teachers to meet the needs of individual students. Most teachers have manageable student loads and small class sizes that range on average from 15 to 22 students. Class sizes fall within the guidelines of the board of education, limiting classes to 25 students for the 300 and 400-levels and 15 students for 200-level courses. Analysis of data from 2006-7 school year through 2010-11 indicates a downward trend in the numbers of courses with more than 25 students. The overall student load for teachers ranges from a low of 74 students in the sciences, up to 96 for social studies, allowing teachers to meet their students' learning needs. There is some disparity in the number of classes taught by members of different departments. The science teachers in the school teach four classes and have additional lab periods in their schedule. Most teachers in math and foreign languages teach the equivalent of five classes. English and history teachers have the equivalent of 4.5 classes as they are required to teach nine semester classes. American Studies teachers are required to teach eight semester courses over the school year. Reasonable class sizes and balanced student loads enable teachers at DHS to meet the needs of students. (self-study, teachers, Endicott Survey)

The principal, working with building leaders, provides instructional leadership that is generally rooted in the school's core values, beliefs, and learning expectations. DHS building leaders include the principal, three assistant principals, a director of guidance, and a director of music, an assistant director of special education as well as department coordinators and teaching education and mentoring (TEAM) program leaders. Instructional leadership includes bi-monthly instructional seminars for new teachers, the dissemination of monthly newsletters, and workshops related to various disciplines and topics. Last year, the principal modeled instructional leadership by teaching an AP Calculus course while continuing to perform his role as an administrator. This enabled the mathematics department teachers to work collaboratively with their principal as a staff member, learning from his instructional expertise as a former classroom teacher. His passion for the practice of teaching was projected to the faculty and reminded them of how important he regards the teaching profession. Additionally, the principal reviews all final exams for academic rigor and uses the Socratic method in problem-solving with his assistant principals to stimulate critical thinking skills. Despite the evidence that instructional leadership is strong, there are insufficient specific links to

the school's core values, beliefs, and learning expectations, resulting in weaker connections between learning expectations and instruction. ((self-study, teachers, Endicott Survey)

DHS teachers, students, and parents have meaningful and defined roles in decision-making that promote responsibility and ownership. Teachers have clearly defined roles in the decision-making process and are able to voice their concerns through the faculty council. Many DHS parents are emotionally and personally invested in their child's education, as shown by the attendance at all school-related meetings and parents' frequent communication with school personnel. In addition, most of Darien Board of Education members have one or more children presently enrolled at DHS and understand and advocate for school needs. DHS students are allowed an abundance of freedom and independence that empowers them to take responsibility and ownership for their actions. The student asset survey provides an additional mechanism for students to openly express their opinions at a formal level. Administrators have established forums for facilitating communication between teachers, parents, and students, including the faculty council, DHS Parents' Association, Guidance Advisory Board, and Community Council. Teachers, administrators, students, and parents, who collectively work together, play an essential, effective, and meaningful role in decision-making, pride, and ownership in the school. (board of education, parents, self-study)

DHS teachers exercise initiative and leadership essential to the improvement of their students' engagement in learning. Students say that DHS teachers are extremely supportive and understanding and regularly meet with students to advise and guide them. The curriculum council, made up of teachers from each department, oversees curriculum, assessment, instructional, and organizational practices. The council votes on new and revised course offerings and curricula and presents the results to the administrator for approval. Although teachers engage in collaborative studies, analyze learning and teaching, and use resources during professional development, only 46% of the staff members agree or strongly agree that these programs enable teachers to acquire and use skills to improve instruction and assessment. In addition, teachers say that they do not always have the necessary time or feedback to put newly acquired skills into practice. DHS teachers often recommend new initiatives to improve the overall culture of the school. The social competency "Names" program, for example, has been recognized as an effective means of preventing bullying and promoting student diversity. The teacher-initiated senior internship program allows students to work in the surrounding community to experience authentic work and gain skills. Teachers who exercise initiative and leadership are essential to the overall climate and life of the school and provide a role model to students. (board of education, parents, self-study)

Although the board of education, superintendent, and principal have a functional, collaborative, and reflective relationship, implementation of the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century

learning expectations has not yet been fully realized. The Endicott Survey shows that 83% of the school staff members agree that the board of education, superintendent, and principal collaborate in the process of promoting learning expectations. The challenge is that many of the staff members and students find these expectations complex to connect to daily practice and difficult to fully implement. A continued collaborative and reflective relationship between the school board, superintendent, and principal will be an essential part of the school's efforts to adopt the school's 21st century learning expectations and help students master them. (board of education, parents, self-study)

The school board and superintendent provide sufficient decision-making autonomy for the principal to lead the school. Board policy clearly defines the principal's role and they entrust him with leading and managing all aspects of high school life. The superintendent is able to provide clear examples of the principal taking action in relation to recent controversial student issues, the frequency of field trip offerings, staffing decisions, budget allocations, personnel cuts, and innovative reassignments of staff. In relation to complex and important decisions, such as the recent initiative of the school's PLC program, a strong and collaborative relationship can be seen to exist between the central office leadership team and the principal. Board of education members suggest that there is high level of principal involvement in the creation of the budget and its presentation to the board. The budget process begins in September at the teacher level, moves to department supervisors, and ends with the principal assembling and presenting the budget request to the school board. When the board and superintendent provide a good deal of decision-making authority to the principal the needs of all stakeholders can be readily met. (self-study, teachers, central office administrators, school leadership sub-committee)

## **Commendations**

1. The motivation of students and staff to succeed academically at high levels
2. The willingness of students to assume personal responsibility for their learning
3. The pervasive level of school pride evident in classrooms, athletics, and co-curricular programs
4. The active role adults play in promoting positive interactions and discouraging negative behavior
5. The broad spectrum of course selections
6. The strong and meaningful relationships between students, teachers coaches, club advisors, and campus monitors
7. The time and resources dedicated to the newly initiated professional learning communities (PLCs)
8. The many informal and formal vehicles that give voices to students, teachers, and parents
9. The students' freedom and independence that provide ownership and responsibility for student decision-making



10. The supportive school board that has a clear focus on high expectations for the school and is able to collaborate with the central office administrators and the school principal
11. The instructional leadership role of the principal
12. The leadership of the teachers in school initiatives and a variety of school programs and activities
13. The effective opportunities teachers, students, and parents have in the decision-making process

### **Recommendations**

1. Implement grouping patterns that ensure that all students, regardless of ability level, have challenging learning expectation
2. Review and revise the advisory program so that it more clearly fits the goal of assisting students in achieving the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations
3. Increase the frequency and provide structure and protocols for PLC meeting sessions so that teachers have more meaningful collaboration within departments
4. Provide resources for teachers to participate in workshops and conferences in order to maintain currency with best practices
5. Formally evaluate both non-tenured and tenured teachers more frequently and regularly

## Support Standard



### School Resources for Learning

*Student learning and well-being are dependent upon adequate and appropriate support. The school is responsible for providing an effective range of coordinated programs and services. These resources enhance and improve student learning and well-being and support the school's core values and beliefs. Student support services enable each student to achieve the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations.*

1. The school has timely, coordinated, and directive intervention strategies for all students, including identified and at-risk students that support each student's achievement of the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations.
2. The school provides information to families, especially to those most in need, about available student support services.
3. Support services staff use technology to deliver an effective range of coordinated services for each student.
4. School counseling services have an adequate number of certified/licensed personnel and support staff who:
  - deliver a written, developmental program
  - meet regularly with students to provide personal, academic, career, and college counseling
  - engage in individual and group meetings with all students
  - deliver collaborative outreach and referral to community and area mental health agencies and social service providers
  - use ongoing, relevant assessment data, including feedback from the school community, to improve services and ensure each student achieves the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations.
5. The school's health services have an adequate number of certified/licensed personnel and support staff who:
  - provide preventative health services and direct intervention services
  - use an appropriate referral process
  - conduct ongoing student health assessments
  - use ongoing, relevant assessment data, including feedback from the school community, to improve services and ensure each student achieves the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations.

6. Library/media services are integrated into curriculum and instructional practices and have an adequate number of certified/licensed personnel and support staff who:
  - are actively engaged in the implementation of the school's curriculum
  - provide a wide range of materials, technologies, and other information services in support of the school's curriculum
  - ensure that the facility is available and staffed for students and teachers before, during, and after school
  - are responsive to students' interests and needs in order to support independent learning
  - conduct ongoing assessment using relevant data, including feedback from the school community, to improve services and ensure each student achieves the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations.
  
7. Support services for identified students, including special education, Section 504 of the ADA, and English language learners, have an adequate number of certified/licensed personnel and support staff who:
  - collaborate with all teachers, counselors, targeted services, and other support staff in order to achieve the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations
  - provide inclusive learning opportunities for all students
  - perform ongoing assessment using relevant data, including feedback from the school community, to improve services and ensure each student achieves the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations.

## School Resources for Learning

### Conclusions

DHS has coordinated intervention strategies for students, including identified and at-risk students. The school has had its student intervention team (SIT) for over 22 years and has evolved over time to more effectively address the changing needs of students through the Response to Intervention (RtI) program. The purpose of the SIT is to address the needs of students who are most in need academically and to provide comprehensive support through consistent data management and support services and through regular education interventions. Prior to a referral to special education, names of at-risk students are referred to the SIT, an on-going committee comprised of the school psychologists, a guidance counselor, an administrator, the coordinator for special education, and, at times, involved parents. Referrals to the SIT are made by classroom teachers, guidance counselors, parents, administrators, or the students themselves. The team meets once each week, and the result of these meetings is often the implementation of supports and monitoring services to help the student become more academically successful. In addition to the services already mentioned, the SIT recommends additional assistance from classroom teachers, the DHS Learning Connections rooms, the homework center, faculty and staff members, and National Honor Society tutors. If sufficient progress is not made with the additional intervention, students may be referred to special education. Communication between the SIT, the student, the teachers, and the parents is critical to the success of the interventions and is generally effective. The school's coordinated intervention structure provides adequate support for at-risk learners. (school support staff, self-study, teachers)

DHS provides good levels of information to families, especially those most in need, about available student support services. Information about support services is available on the DHS website, in the course catalogue, and in the student handbook. The guidance department also has created a brochure outlining available student support services. Guidance counselors regularly call, e-mail, and meet with students, parents, and teachers regarding individual student issues and available support services. As needed, referrals are also made to the following agencies and organizations, among others: Abilis, Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, the Center for Hope, Child Guidance, Darien Social Services, Department of Children and Families, Den for Grieving Children, Family Center in Darien, Four Winds Psychiatric Hospital, Kids in Crisis, Renfrew Center, Sexual Assault Center in Stamford, Silver Hill Hospital, and select individual social workers and therapists. A newsletter with more detailed information from the guidance department is included in the principal's newsletter, which is e-mailed to families three times per year and through the Darien Parents Newsletter, which is e-mailed weekly to families through the parent association. The special education department hosts coffees for the parents of identified students where families learn about support services available at DHS. Representatives from the special

education department attend freshman coffees that are run by the guidance department. These DHS outreach efforts ensure that families and students in need have a wide range of access to helpful support services. (self-study, teachers, school support staff)

Support services professional staff members use technology to deliver an effective range of coordinated services for each student. The guidance department uses the Naviance program and has an extensive website with information, such as an online course catalog, a presentation and videos, and other pertinent guidance news and information. However, some guidance website information is not kept up-to-date. Special education teachers and other support personnel such as school psychologists and social workers use e-mail as a way to correspond with teachers and keep them up to date on students. Special education staff members also use e-mail to send classroom teachers profiles of special education students in their classrooms along with descriptions of the disability, other pertinent information, and page eight of the individualized education plan (IEP) that describes accommodations. Special education and support staff members also use Microsoft Outlook to create calendars and schedule PPTs (planning placement team) and other meetings and events. The special education department uses IEP Direct in the creation and implementation of IEPs for students. Support services staff members use technology in a meaningful way to deliver information to students and to support coordinated services. (teachers, school support staff, self-study, work samples)

For the number of students served, the school counseling services department has a more than adequate number of certified and licensed personnel and support staff members but lacks a written, developmental guidance program. The guidance department consists of one full-time director, seven full-time school counselors, and two full-time clerical assistants. The seven guidance counselors serve 1,326 students at the school. Six counselors have a student load of between 190 and 200 students across all four grade levels; one counselor currently has a student load of 130; and the director of guidance has a student load of thirty. The counseling staff members collaborate frequently with other support staff members, including two full-time school psychologists, one full-time social worker, and a drug and alcohol counselor (DHS Connections Counselor) available one day per week. Guidance counselors have used the 90-minute PLC (professional learning committee) days to meet with groups of students but find it a challenge to implement group developmental lessons because there is no scheduled time to do so. Although an adequate number of staff members is available, the absence of a written and implemented developmental guidance program may limit students' achievement of all of the school's social and civic learning expectations. (self-study, teachers, school support staff)

Counselors meet regularly with individuals and groups of students to provide personal, academic, career, and college counseling. Counselors meet with students as requested during free periods, study halls, before and after school, and during lunch periods.

Counselors consistently follow a timeline and plan for providing individual information and services to students in each grade. In the fall the focus is primarily on freshmen and seniors. Counselors meet with all freshmen at the beginning of the school year to discuss transitional issues, and they meet with seniors to monitor transition after high school. Most senior focus is on the college process. However, not all students attend college after high school, and counselors have identified as an area of concern their ability to meet these students' needs. Therefore, when counseling parents and students, they have investigated other avenues to support such options, such as the gap year. In the spring, groups of tenth grade students complete the "Do What You Are" personality survey in the Naviance program. Counselors also meet with all juniors and their parents to discuss the college and career process. February and March are devoted to registration of courses. At a minimum, all students have the opportunity to meet with their school counselors twice a year in formal grade-level programs, and they meet a third time for academic advisement during the pre-registration period. DHS students can both register for appointments and drop-in on their counselors without an appointment. Because counselors meet regularly with individuals and groups of students, they are able to provide adequate personal, academic, career, and college counseling. (teachers, self-study, school support staff)

The guidance department is highly involved in the implementation of collaborative outreach programs and referrals to community and area mental health agencies and social service providers. Guidance counselors make individual referrals to local agencies and service providers on an as-needed basis. The process typically involves frequent meetings with students for regular and ongoing support and requires communication between the guidance counselors and representatives of outside agencies and providers. Guidance counselors, special education support staff members, and the nurses collaborate on interventions for students in crisis that could result in referrals to social service, mental health, courts, and/or substance abuse programs. The guidance department uses a wrap-around approach to develop a collaborative approach to services. These referrals are made to the following agencies and organizations, among others: Abilis, Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, the Center for Hope, Child Guidance, Darien Social Services, Department of Children and Families, Den for Grieving Children, Family Center in Darien, Four Winds Psychiatric Hospital, Kids in Crisis, Renfrew Center, Sexual Assault Center in Stamford, Silver Hill Hospital, and selected individual social workers and therapists. The guidance department maintains a highly productive working relationship with each of these agencies and strives to address the students' social, emotional, and physical needs through these interactions. In addition, outreach is provided by the guidance department through various community agencies. There are positive, collaborative working relationships between the guidance department and the following community outreach agencies: COMMIT program, Darien Community Association, the Depot, Junior Project Friendship, Liberation Programs, Norwalk Community College, Person to Person, Post 53, organizations involved with the senior internship program, St. Vincent's Behavioral

Health Center, and local scholarship organizations. These relationships are designed to foster prevention and intervention strategies for students and are funded jointly by the school and participating agencies. As a result of these active partnerships, the student services department meets the identified needs of DHS students. (school support staff, self-study, teachers)

The guidance department uses ongoing, relevant assessment data, including feedback from the school community, to improve services but does not explicitly connect this feedback to the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. Data such as feedback from students, parents, and teachers is used as a basis for evaluating and improving the various student support services provided. Forms of student feedback also include graduate surveys for college freshmen to evaluate how well prepared they were for college; senior surveys for students to evaluate their four-year guidance experience at DHS; Naviance pre- and post-surveys to assess the guidance department's workshop for juniors; e-mails; and individual student comments made in personal meetings. Surveys for students in grades 9-11 are administered at the end of each school year as a way to gather information about improving guidance services. Parent feedback is gathered through the junior parent survey to assess the presentation of the college process at the DHS Junior Planning Night; parent e-mails to counselors; letters; documented parent visits and phone calls; the Endicott Survey; parent written evaluations; monthly Darien High School Parent Association meetings with the head of guidance; and two parent coffees per year held with each grade level. The guidance advisory council, which considers input from both parents and administrators, meets once per semester to promote communication and discussion of guidance-related topics. Teacher feedback is obtained through e-mails, phone calls, individual meetings, faculty meetings, and departmental council meetings. While the multiple opportunities for feedback help inform guidance services, the lack of connection between them and the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations limits guidance's success in supporting the learner expectations. (teachers, support service staff and teachers)

The school's health services have an adequate number of certified/licensed personnel and support staff members who provide preventive health services and direct intervention services. Darien High School is staffed with two full-time registered nurses who collaborate to provide care for the high school population. The district director of health services and an administrative assistant are also located at the high school, providing additional support as needed. The health office is open and staffed every school day from 7:25 a.m. until 2:35 p.m. All state-mandated procedures, such as the ninth grade vision and scoliosis screening and the tenth grade Connecticut State Health Assessment record, are handled by health services. The health services staff members work collaboratively with personnel in the guidance and special education departments and support services to provide a wide range of preventive health services to the school community members. Some of the preventive services include epinephrine training; automated electronic defibrillator and emergency response team training; a blood-borne

pathogen video and test for staff members; field trip management; notification of flu clinic and the Hepatitis B program; Wellness Program; guidelines and suggestions to prevent the spread of illness; and the impact/concussion program. An emergency response plan is in place that includes designated areas of refuge, and the emergency phone number is posted on all phones in the building. There is a private place designated for students who may be having a personal problem in relation to stress or anxiety where they can de-escalate. Students feel that the health office is a place all students can receive assistance. The health services staff members provide a range of preventive and intervention services that are well matched to the needs of the students. (self-study, school support staff, students)

Health professionals use an appropriate referral process to support student wellness. Health services provide guidance to students, staff members, and parents, with the goal of minimizing student health problems that may inhibit achievement of the school's core values and beliefs. Specifically, health services staff members actively promote the development of the skills necessary to lead a healthy and balanced life as characterized by physical wellness, self-awareness, emotional maturity, and personal independence. The health services staff members work closely with guidance counselors, school psychologists, and social workers to provide a range of services depending on students' needs. Students may also be referred to their primary care physician or parent; appropriate referrals to outside agencies are usually made in collaboration with other support services staff members in order to determine the best agency to meet the specific needs of the student. Some of the agencies include: the Renfrew Center, 211 Teen Counseling Services, and Center for Hope, Person to Person, Darien Community Fund, and the Town of Darien Health Department. The Endicott Survey indicates that 79% of students know whom to ask if they have a personal problem at school, and 80% of students comfortable going to the school nurse. Students and staff members (81%) seem to be well aware of the health services available, but parents (68%) seem less well informed about the preventive health and direct intervention services. In collaboration with other departments, the health services department works to help students to cope with stress. Because health professionals use an appropriate referral process, health services staff members are able to support student wellness. (Endicott Survey, students, self-study, school support staff)

Health services staff members conduct ongoing student health assessments throughout the school year and use ongoing, relevant assessment data, including feedback from the school community, to improve services and ensure each student achieves the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learner expectations. Health services staff members review the DHS emergency form; sports physicals; allergy plans; doctors' directives about students' conditions, care, and medication orders; and reports on all injuries that prohibit full student activity. Additional information regarding student health is obtained through verbal, written, and email correspondence with staff members, guidance counselors, doctors, and parents. The health services staff members participate in pupil placement



team (PPT), Section 504, and weekly student assistance team (SAT) meetings as requested. The health services staff members also track student attendance, flag concerns, and work with homebound students as they transition back into school. These practices allow health services staff members to identify and support students with health and safety concerns and aid in the development of an individual student health care plan. The health services staff members communicate student health care information to teachers and coaches as necessary while maintaining appropriate levels of confidentiality. All medical records are maintained in a district software program called School Nurse Assistance Program (SNAP) which is accessible only by health services staff members. Older paper records are archived and kept in a secure location. Improvements to services are made on an ongoing basis based on feedback and self-assessments. Monthly meetings with all district health services staff members are held to review practices and procedures. Health service staff members are successful in meeting and helping students to develop the skills necessary to lead healthy, well-balanced lives. (school support staff, self-study, teachers)

The library/media services are integrated into the school's curriculum and instructional practices and have an adequate number of certified/licensed personnel and support staff members who are actively engaged in the implementation of the school's curriculum. There are two full-time certified school library media specialists (SLMS). One of the SLMS also serves as the library service coordinator for grades 6-12 and is responsible for all library/media operations, including the media studies curriculum, meeting with teachers by course or department, the district library budget, and reporting to the assistant superintendent for secondary schools to regularly review library/media services. In addition, the media specialist serves on the curriculum council and will chair the council during the 2012-2013 school year. In addition, the library/media center has three full-time support staff members. Recent changes to staffing have led to revisions in the non-certified job descriptions to include student supervision. The media studies curriculum, consisting of two sections of video production classes per semester, is currently taught by an English teacher. This teacher also oversees management and distribution of all video equipment. Library staff members develop the library collection to support current course curriculum and anticipated courses. The librarians e-mail staff members with current information to support their curricula. Teachers sign-up the library for classroom use and often meet with a library/media specialist before their class goes to the library to discuss learning objectives of the lesson. The library/media staff is also responsible for helping in the research component of the curriculum. They go into various classes to teach research skills and also use Noodle Tools to help students meet curricular goals. The active engagement of library/media staff members and integration of library resources into curriculum helps students achieve learning expectations. (school support staff, students, self-study)

A wide range of library/media materials, technology, and other information is provided to support the school's curriculum. In addition to books, the library/media

center circulates periodicals, audio books, CDs, and videos and provides a large number of online resources that may be accessed remotely. Currently, the library holds 35,260 books, 51 periodicals (including archival collections), 676 audio holdings, and 2,130 videos. The collection contains ample resources to support the school's curriculum and instruction for all academic departments. The online resources include subscription databases, e-Books, and digitized videos. Students have full access to subscription databases and e-Books, some of which also include audio and visual resources. The library media specialists work with teachers to tailor specific library/media resources to assignments. If the library does not own the source and it is needed to support the curriculum, the library/media specialist will purchase it. All library/media resources are cataloged and searchable using Destiny Library Manager, which may be accessed remotely by students and staff. SLMS also provides direct instruction on library resources in classrooms and computer labs. A section of the library/media center contains computers and an integrated projector that can be used for class instruction. When not used by a class, the computers are available for student use. The library is set up for wireless access, can seat up to one hundred and sixty-one students, and is often filled to capacity both with classes and individual students. The fifty-one student computers are the most used computers in the school. The technology committee is engaged in the process of researching the library/media center's future technology needs. The library/media center provides various learning venues for student use, including two small study rooms and one larger study room and a reading room for silent study. The library/media center also loans digital cameras, video equipment, microphone headsets, and calculators for teacher and student use. The breadth of materials and other information supports the school's curriculum well. (school support staff, students, self-study)

The library/media center is appropriately staffed and available to all students and staff members before, during, and after school. The hours of operation are posted outside the library/media center entrance, in the student handbook, and on the library/media website. Students and staff members are welcome in the library from 7:00 am to 3:00 pm each regular school day. The daily average visitor count in 2009-2010 was 1,522. Increasing enrollment and the lack of other spaces for students to congregate during their unassigned periods has resulted in an increasing number of students visiting the library/media center, causing overcrowding during busy periods, lunch time, and before school starts. As a consequence, student supervision and rule enforcement by library staff members has become a more time-consuming responsibility. There is a designated silent study area and a more communal space where collaboration is acceptable. The library/media services are also closely linked to a variety of school and community activities that take place in this space before, during, and after school, such as the student Blue Wave News programs; programming for the local access cable channel 78; and filming of various extracurricular activities. The DHS Library also maintains ongoing communication with the Darien Town Library, which serves student needs after 3:00 pm and on weekends. The adequate staffing and availability of the

library make it an easily accessible place for students to work and learn. (students, parents, support staff members, panel presentation, and self-study)

School library media specialists are responsive to students' interests and needs in order to support independent learning. Recent implementation of the TRAILS: Tool for Real-time Assessment of Information Literacy Skills online assessment tool has provided data from all ninth graders and has been used to guide literacy instruction for individual students. The SLMS also provide instruction to classes and to individual students on the use of a variety of resources, including Destiny Library Manager, WebPath Express and One Search, online databases, e-Books, and NoodleTools. Students are also regularly supported by the SLMS on effective research practices and proper MLA documentation. Recently, NoodleTools has also been used by the SLMS to provide formative assessment of student sources of information and citation formats. The SLMS are very responsive to student interests and needs in order to support and develop independent learning. (students, teachers, self-study)

To improve services, school library media specialists conduct ongoing assessment using relevant data, including feedback from the school community. However, they cannot ensure each student achieves the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations, since these are not formally embedded in library media services. Teachers are routinely involved in the selection of materials for the library/media center, and the SLMS actively search for available resources to best meet the curricular and instructional needs of staff and students. The librarians also provide differentiated resources in order to meet all students' learning needs. They are sensitive to the dignity of the individual, honoring diversity for all in a secure and nurturing environment. SLMS work to ensure that library space is conducive to different types of learners as it relates to choosing books. The collection contains ample resources to support the school's curriculum and instruction for all academic departments, more direct connection to the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations will ensure that the facility supports these expectations. (support staff members, students, and self-study)

Support services for identified student populations, including students with disabilities and English language learners, have an adequate number of certified/licensed personnel and support staff members. There are thirteen special education (SE) teachers, two school psychologists, one social worker, two speech and language pathologists, one itinerant occupational therapist, one itinerant physical therapist, access to a hearing or visually impaired specialist as needed, one specialist for English language learners, 1.2 reading teachers, eleven paraprofessionals, and a part-time clerical support person. A part-time assistant director of special education coordinates all personnel; one special education teacher also serves as the coordinator for the department; and a drug and alcohol connections counselor works at the school one day each week. Support services for identified students have an adequate number of

certified/licensed personnel and support staff to support student learning. (self-study, school support members, teachers)

Support service staff members collaborate with teachers, counselors, targeted services, and other support staff members, but lack an identified connection to the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. The school psychologists and social worker address the faculty during faculty meetings to discuss topics such as child abuse and neglect, suicide prevention, and bullying, and to instruct about the referral process. The student intervention team (SIT) which addresses academic concerns and the student assistance team (SAT) which is more focused upon behavioral, emotional, or family issues meet weekly to discuss at-risk students. These teams are made up of the two school psychologists, guidance counselors, and administrators. If a student is referred to special education, a planning and placement team (PPT) meeting is held. This team consists of the student, parents, school psychologist, social worker, special education teacher, general education teacher, an administrator, and other applicable personnel as needed. While overall levels of service are strong, a lack of direct connection to 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations minimizes the maximum positive impact of the collaboration. (self study, teachers, support staff members)

Support personnel provide appropriate inclusive services to all students. General education interventions available to all students include: academic support classes, CAPT workshop courses, individualized help from classroom teachers, help through the DHS Learning Connections rooms, peer tutoring by National Honor Society students, a Reading and Study Skills course, the homework center, and the Writer's Workshop course. Students who have not meet goal on the CAPT are scheduled for the CAPT workshop classes. Learning connections rooms (English/social studies, math/science, and foreign languages) are staffed by certified teachers and/or a special education teacher every period of the school day. Students can go to the DHS Learning Connections rooms during a free period to receive help and support. The DHS Alternate Learning Program (ALP) staffed by two teachers is available to students who seek an alternative to the regular school day structure and has a community component. ALP provides small group instruction in English, history, science, and a dedicated physical education course shared with CORE (Creative Opportunities to Restructure Education). The alternative learning program is being discontinued next year because of a drop in numbers, and the students currently in that program will be included in regular classes. Special education students take part in a continuum of care. The mission of the department is to use the least restrictive environment model and place students based on their individual needs. Depending on the nature of their disability, students may take part in a variety of services. One service is the DHS Learning Center, which provides students with IEPs (individualized education plans) more direct subject-specific instruction as it relates to their IEP goals and objectives. The CORE program was instituted to support special education students diagnosed with a social and emotional disturbance or behavioral concerns that cannot be managed in a

typical education setting. It is a more specialized and focused program for students with a higher level of need. The Excel program is a life-skills centered special education program for students from 14-21 who are significantly disabled and are in need of a specialized functional approach to learning. Support personnel provide appropriate inclusive services to all students that are personalized and high quality. Support personnel and programs are adequate to meet the needs of the students they serve. (self-study, teachers, school support staff)

Support services personnel collect assessment data to improve services but have not yet made a connection between their programs and the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. The district has recently focused on evaluating services for identified students, and last year it hired an outside consultant to conduct an audit of services. Information gained through parent interviews, teacher surveys, and student input was assessed. As a result, the district decided to create a parent resource manual of services and a teacher resource manual. Some assessment data has been collected but has not been viewed through the lens of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. As a consequence, the school cannot be sure all students achieve these expectations. (self-study, teachers, school support staff)

### **Commendations**

1. The availability of information to parents and the school community about all support services available to students
2. The comprehensive guidance website that addresses a wide range of services for students
3. The willingness of counselors to make themselves available to students
4. The professional and collaborative relationship between the library media specialists and teachers to support curriculum and instruction
5. The multiple sources of feedback used to inform student services
6. The safe and secure atmosphere at DHS
7. The collaboration among health service and other support service personnel to provide appropriate referral services
8. The wide breadth of resources available to staff and students
9. The quality of the video production equipment and services available to students in the library
10. The TRAILS assessment as a personal learning tool for students
11. The commitment of the district to provide generous staffing levels for guidance and school health

## **Recommendations**

1. Formally document and track intervention and performance data on each at-risk student
2. Use collected data to align student support programs to student learning to 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations
3. Ensure that the guidance website is kept updated
4. Develop and implement a comprehensive developmental guidance curriculum
5. Increase support of and planning for students not attending college after high school
6. Use feedback from students and parents about the student services departments to ensure each student achieves the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations
7. Ensure that the library is used for intended purposes and identify alternative areas for student collaboration
8. Ensure that the library/media services department understands how the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations relate to library services

## Support Standard



### Community Resources for Learning

*The achievement of the school's 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations requires active community, governing board, and parent advocacy. Through dependable and adequate funding, the community provides the personnel, resources, and facilities to support the delivery of curriculum, instruction, programs, and services.*

1. The community and the district's governing body provide dependable funding for:
  - a wide range of school programs and services
  - sufficient professional and support staff
  - ongoing professional development and curriculum revision
  - a full range of technology support
  - sufficient equipment
  - sufficient instructional materials and supplies.
2. The school develops, plans, and funds programs:
  - to ensure the maintenance and repair of the building and school plant
  - to properly maintain, catalogue, and replace equipment
  - to keep the school clean on a daily basis.
3. The community funds and the school implements a long-range plan that addresses:
  - programs and services
  - enrollment changes and staffing needs
  - facility needs
  - technology
  - capital improvements.
4. Faculty and building administrators are actively involved in the development and implementation of the budget.
5. The school site and plant support the delivery of high quality school programs and services.
6. The school maintains documentation that the physical plant and facilities meet all applicable federal and state laws and are in compliance with local fire, health, and safety regulations.

7. All professional staff actively engage parents and families as partners in each student's education and reach out specifically to those families who have been less connected with the school.
8. The school develops productive parent, community, business, and higher education partnerships that support student learning.



## Community Resources for Learning

### Conclusions

The community of Darien, Connecticut and its board of education provide substantial and dependable funding for a wide range of school programs and services, sufficient professional and support staff, on-going professional development and curriculum revision, and a full range of technology support, sufficient equipment, and sufficient instructional materials and supplies. Despite the challenging fiscal environment of the last four years, the community of Darien has continued to provide generous support for the education of the town's children. Since the 2007-2008 school year, the Darien Public Schools have increased the annual operating budgets by 6.35%, 3.64%, 4.84%, and 6.4%, respectively. Darien High School continues to provide a wide range of adequately staffed academic courses, sports, and after-school clubs and activities. However, students pay a yearly \$100 fee to participate in co-curricular activities, and many teams and clubs rely on monetary support from the community at large to cover a portion of their current operating costs. Although some professional development is provided off-site for individuals or small groups, the bulk of professional development is provided in-house and takes place on scheduled release days. This keeps the cost of professional development reasonable. Curriculum revision, on the other hand, is not as well funded, possibly resulting in limits to the school's ability to develop, disseminate, and implement 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations. The budget provides for up-to-date technology, equipment, and instructional materials and supplies to support teaching and learning. Every classroom is equipped with an overhead projector, and each teacher is provided with a tablet computer and the software and training to use it to enhance instruction. The microscopy lab is equipped with networked microscopes capable of displaying images for class viewing. Beyond academics, the athletic department, visual/performing arts, the library media center, and other programs and services are also provided with state-of-the-art equipment. The community and board of education continue to provide a high level of funding for the personnel, resources, and facilities to support the effective delivery of curriculum, instruction, programs, and services. (facility tour, classroom observations, self-study, school board, school leadership committee)

Darien High School develops, plans, and funds programs to ensure the maintenance and repair of the facilities, maintenance of equipment, and daily cleaning of the school. The repair and maintenance programs are coordinated and supervised by the director of facilities and operations and the director of maintenance, both of whom regularly communicate and collaborate with the principal. The school building is six years old and has been extremely well maintained. All major equipment is maintained and replaced based on a formal repair/replacement plan developed by the director of maintenance. The operating and capital improvement budget has increased in each of the last three fiscal years and continues to include funding to update/replace

equipment on a regular basis. All major school equipment is inventoried and catalogued at the close of the school year. Department coordinators are responsible for informing the director of maintenance about any classroom or departmental concerns. Classroom and cafeteria furniture are also replaced on an annual basis as part of the director of maintenance's plan. The school custodial staff consists of seven DHS employees, as well as additional contracted workers who perform after hours cleaning, which reduces costs. A member of the district's maintenance staff is also available at the high school on a daily basis. If additional maintenance staff members are required for a major project, the facilities director ensures their availability. The facilities director also provides two full-time, district groundskeepers, responsible for the regular upkeep of the grounds, including all athletic fields and tennis courts. The result of this rigorous and comprehensive custodial and maintenance service plan is evident across the facility. Rooms and spaces in the building are clean, well lit, and provide a safe environment for both students and staff members to engage both in the learning process and in activities of daily living. Classrooms and locker rooms are equally clean and well maintained. In addition to the "public" spaces, the department also maintains the rooms containing the equipment for daily operations, such as the boilers, HVAC, electrical, and mechanical rooms. Results of the Endicott Survey indicate that over 90% of students, parents, and staff members agree that Darien High School is clean and well maintained. While Darien High School is a relatively new building, the school has been proactive in assuring that the maintenance, repair, and cleaning policies assure that the facilities are properly maintained. The excellent repair, maintenance, and cleaning of the school's physical plant enhance and support teaching and learning. (facility tour, support staff, self-study, Endicott Survey)

The Darien community adequately funds and the school has developed acceptable plans for implementing future programs to ensure high quality education continues to be provided. Despite the current economic downturn, DHS has generally maintained adequate services and added programs such as squash through the athletic department. No significant courses, programs, services, staffing, or facility funds have been cut in the budget process. Although the recent budgets have included funding to maintain current technology and equipment, there are concerns that insufficient funds are being set aside for future capital needs. The community has had a long history of generous financial contributions to the district, such as the DHS Technology Fund and the DHS Parents Association although such donations cannot regularly provide for basic needs. Thus, although the community continues to fund current academic, extracurricular, and facility needs, careful attention to budget planning for future technology and capital improvement needs will be required to continue to support the students' ability to develop 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. (support staff, school leadership sub-committee, self-study, school board)

Faculty and building administrators at DHS are regularly involved in the development and implementation of the budget. The budget process begins with department

coordinators soliciting funding requests from teachers. These requests are reviewed by the department coordinators, prioritized, and passed on to the building principal for further review. Documentation of faculty budget requests indicates strong building-level involvement in the budget process. However, the Endicott Survey shows a majority of staff members does not feel sufficiently involved in the process. Only 26% of staff members respond that they feel they have input in the development of the budget. There appears to be a disconnect in the process of approvals. The high school principal submits budget proposals to the superintendent of schools. The superintendent's proposed budget is presented to the board of education and communicated to the community at a series of scheduled public meetings attended by members of the board of finance, members of the representative town meeting, and the public. The board of education then adopts a preliminary budget for the following year. The board of finance then reviews the proposal; members of this board have the authority to reduce the school budget by a dollar amount but cannot decide how the board of education allocates the monies. Final approval of the budget takes place when the representative town meeting approves the budget. While the process appears to allow for faculty members to be involved in the development of the budget, relatively few feel they have authentic input in the process. As a consequence, the improvement of curriculum and instruction may be negatively affected by the staff members' perceived lack of ownership in the budget process. (support staff, self-study, documentation, meetings)

The Darien High School site and plant thoroughly support the delivery of high quality school programs and services through adequate and appropriate space to ensure full implementation of the educational program. The \$70 million school building was completed in 2005, and DHS moved in for the 2005-2006 school year. General classroom space is adequate. Results of the Endicott Survey indicate that students, parents, and staff members agree that the school supports its programs and services, from classrooms and science labs to the auditorium and cafeteria. Classrooms have been added and/or modified to accommodate the increasing enrollment, but some of these modifications have reduced space once used for lockers as well as absorbing two classrooms and a resource room for the special education department. There are no concerns about adequate space for general education academic classrooms, library media center needs, or other areas such as visual/performing arts. Equipment and available technology in school departments and programs is consistently state-of-the-art, such as the cafeteria kitchen/food preparation equipment and science laboratory equipment. The cafeteria and food preparation area are sufficient in size and adequately equipped and organized to facilitate rapid processing of lunch orders and to provide the students with a place to eat their lunch. Recently, the auxiliary cafeteria was closed to make space for an additional classroom, and the lunch wave schedule was rearranged to accommodate all of the student lunches in the main cafeteria. Students and staff and faculty members identify the noise level in the cafeteria as excessively high. Facilities outside of core academic areas also contain state-of-the-art equipment to deliver high-quality programs and services. There are no concerns about adequate

space for offices, conference rooms, reception areas, hallways, or outdoor space, including parking. However, the athletic department spends significant money and time organizing and providing space off-campus to ensure that all school sports have adequate time to practice. While increased enrollment has necessitated modification of building space to accommodate instructional space needs, the well maintained and fully provisioned site and plant support the delivery of high quality school programs and services. (facility tour, support staff, school board, self-study)

DHS maintains comprehensive documentation to ensure that the physical plant and facilities meet all applicable federal and state laws and are in compliance with local fire, health, and safety regulations. The inspection reports, maintenance schedules, and incident protocols reflect the school's dedication to the health and safety of the students and staff members. A new policy has been implemented to convert all inspection reports into work orders to assure timely remediation of any future issues. Physical plant and facilities meet all federal and state laws and comply with fire, health, and safety regulations. Documentation is on record in the office of the director of facilities operations. There are plans to digitize all relevant documents and make them available on the district website. DHS has policies and procedures in place to ensure that the building and grounds comply with all federal, state, and local laws. This compliance provides all students and staff members with a safe environment in which the delivery of effective curriculum and instruction can take place. (self-study, documents, facility tour, interviews)

Darien High School encourages, engages, and welcomes parents as partners in the education of their children although it is somewhat less successful in reaching out specifically to those families who have been less connected with the school. DHS has a number of established programs designed to engage parents/families as partners in their students' education. Open house, held each fall, is an extremely well attended event, where parents have the opportunity to meet their children's teachers and hear about course content and expectations. Other programs aimed at engaging parents include DHS Junior College Night, DHS Incoming 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Curriculum Night, DHS Gap Year Fair, and financial aid night. DHS also requires every teacher to create a website to support parent/student communication. Another way in which DHS connects with parents on a consistent basis is through the school website. The school's website has up-to-the minute details of all academic, athletic, social, and community events. In addition, the principal's newsletter is published seasonally, keeping parents apprised of upcoming events, special recognitions, and guidance department and other information and news. The student handbook and course catalog have been published online so that students and parents have access to the most recent information regarding courses, prerequisites, school calendar, rules, and student participation in extra-curricular activities. There are separate grade-level parent coffees with DHS administrators in both the fall and spring, providing yet another avenue for parents to become engaged in their students' education. Darien High School also has a very active

parent's group, the Darien High School Parent Association (DHSPA). The DHSPA is a group of parent volunteers whose mission is to provide information to all DHS parents. Their meetings are held monthly and feature a principal's report, guidance report, information and updates on all DHSPA committee activities and important school-related information as well as special programs. While the Endicott Survey indicates that 82% of the staff members feels the school actively engages families as partners in the students' education, parental responses show only 45% share this opinion. While these statistics show a discrepancy between the perception of staff members and parents, evidence indicates the school supports and encourages a wide variety of opportunities for families to become involved in the learning process of the students. Darien High School provides the means for all families to be fully vested partners in the education process such as extensive online resources; however, there is no formal system to identify families who are not involved and to reach out to them. While the school provides the means for active family involvement, the lack of a formal mechanism to ensure that this is taking place with families who feel less connected with the school may hinder the school's ability to partner with families of every student. (staff members, parents, self-study, documentation, Endicott Survey)

While DHS has exceptionally strong relationships with parents and the community, the school has limited partnerships with institutions of higher education and local businesses. DHS parent and community involvement is extensive and supports the school program and student learning. The school's relationship with institutes of higher learning seems to be primarily in the services of teacher preparation and professional development. A few courses offered at DHS provide opportunities for students to earn college credit, such as the University of Connecticut co-op course, credit through SUNY Albany for the Advanced Research Science course, and some online courses at Johns Hopkins. There is also an opportunity for a campus visit to Norwalk Community College. The faculty would like to expand these opportunities for students to partner with higher education. DHS is also in its third year of offering an internship program for seniors. Students who participate in an internship do not attend the last four weeks of school, instead, they commit to 30 hours per week in the internship. Although the internship program has doubled the number of student participants from the first year, the school would like to expand this program to include every senior. This presents a major challenge, however, given the strong culture of student involvement at school activities and athletics. While most seniors agree that the internship program provides a unique and highly valuable experience, they also decline the opportunity because of the conflict with their other extracurricular activities. If this difficulty were resolved, the program could expand rapidly as a result of the high level of interest expressed by businesses that have already hosted an intern. Despite some challenges around creating learning opportunities outside of the high school, DHS is in a position to develop remarkable and valuable opportunities for its students. (community members, school leadership sub-committee, self-study, teachers, students)

## **Commendations**

1. The state-of-the art equipment and adequate technology across courses, programs, and services
2. The outstanding building cleanliness
3. The district's commitment to providing adequate funding for school repair, maintenance, and cleaning
4. The high school site and plant that thoroughly support the delivery of high quality school programs and services and appropriate space to ensure full implementation of the school's programs and services
5. The school's up-to-date technology in all classrooms across all disciplines
6. The wide array of opportunities for parent involvement
7. The strong support and generous, stable funding provided by the wider community

## **Recommendations**

1. Review and revise budget development structure to involve staff members more fully in budget planning to build more ownership in the process
2. Implement noise reduction methods in the cafeteria
3. Develop strategies to identify and connect with families who are minimally involved in the school
4. Create alternate scheduling options to provide expanded opportunities for student internships
5. Increase partnerships with higher education

## **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 Darien High School. The faculty, school board, and superintendent should 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 initial/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 Darien 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 days (60) of occurrence any substantive change which negatively impacts the school's adherence to the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. The report of substantive change must describe the change itself and detail any impact which the change has had on the school's ability to meet the Standards for Accreditation. The Commission's Substantive Change Policy is included in the Appendix on page 15. 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 evaluation 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 procedures and reporting requirements is provided at Follow-Up Seminars offered by Commission staff following the on-site visit.



## APPENDIX A

### Darien High School NEASC Accreditation Visit April 29 to May 2, 2012

#### Visiting Committee

Judith A. Evans, Ed. D.  
Medway Public Schools  
Medway, MA 02053

Francis Cronin  
East Granby Public Schools  
East Granby, CT 06026

Nancy Brix  
Joel Barlow High School  
Redding, CT 06896

Paul Courtis  
Rockville High School  
Vernon, CT 06066

Jane Gately  
Quaboag Regional Middle/High School  
Warren, MA 01083

Beth Hansen  
Quaboag Regional Middle/High School  
Warren, MA 01083

Elizabeth Lapman  
Lewis s. Mills High Schools  
Burlington, CT 06013

Charles Martie  
Connecticut State Department of Education  
Hartford, CT 06145

Katherine Matz  
Newtown High School  
Sandy Hook, CT 06482

Patricia Michael  
Ridgefield Public Schools  
Ridgefield, CT 06877

Richard Novack  
Fairfield Warde High School  
Fairfield, CT 06825

Silvia Ouellette  
Shepaug Valley High School  
Washington, CT 06793

Thomas Paleologopoulos  
Frederick U. Conard High School  
West Hartford, CT 06107

Caroline Quinn-Alger  
Pomperaug High School  
Southbury, CT 06488

Kaitlin Richard  
Orville H. Platt High School  
Meriden, CT 06451

Jason Schemm  
New Milford High School  
New Milford, CT 06776

Steven Wysowski  
Bristol Eastern High School  
Bristol, CT 06010

Chris York  
Nonnewaug High School  
Woodbury, CT 06798

## APPENDIX B

### NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS & 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 on the school's ability to meet the Standards. The following are potential areas where there might be negative substantive changes which must be reported:

- elimination of fine arts, practical arts, and student activities
- diminished upkeep and maintenance of facilities
- significantly decreased funding
- cuts in the level of administrative and supervisory staffing
- cuts in the number of teachers and/or guidance counselors
- grade level responsibilities of the principal
- cuts in the number of support staff
- decreases in student services
- cuts in the educational media staffing
- increases in student enrollment that cannot be accommodated
- takeover by the state
- inordinate user fees
- changes in the student population that warrant program or staffing modification(s) that cannot be accommodated, e.g., the number of special needs students or vocational students or students with limited English proficiency