

# Summary of Report of the Lincoln Schools K-8 Task Force

November 2002

*This is a brief summary of the Report of the Lincoln Schools K-8 Task Force that was prepared for mailing to all households in Lincoln, as well as households of METCO students in the Lincoln Schools. The full report is available at the Town Offices, the School administrative offices, the Lincoln Library and on the web at <http://www.lincolntown.org>. The Task Force will present its report to the School Committee and the Town on November 20, 2002 at 7:30 in the Donaldson Auditorium at the Brooks School.*

## *Background*

In connection with approval of funding certain shortfalls in the school budget in November 2001, Town Meeting voted to create a Lincoln Schools K-8 Task Force as an independent group to provide analysis and guidance concerning the Lincoln Schools. The Task Force was appointed in January 2002 by a committee consisting of the Moderator and representatives from the Selectmen, the School Committee and the Finance Committee. This committee also drafted a charge for the Task Force focusing inquiry on specific areas.

## *Approach of Task Force*

The Task Force report attempts to answer two broad classes of questions:

- **Costs:** What accounts for the cost of the Lincoln Schools? How do these costs compare with those of similar communities?
- **Educational Practices:** How do educational practices in Lincoln compare to those in similar communities? How can Lincoln's practices be improved?

The Task Force created a detailed survey and received responses from the following seven towns in Eastern Massachusetts with similar size and demographics: Boxborough, Carlisle, Dover, Hamilton-Wenham, Sherborn, Southborough and Weston (surveys were not returned from Concord, Harvard, Manchester and Sudbury). Cost comparisons were based on this data and other publicly available information.

## *Costs Overview*

The Task Force finds that there are three principal reasons for the difference between Lincoln's per student cost and that of comparable towns. First, Lincoln maintains smaller than average class sizes and utilizes a larger number of teachers and other adults to staff these classes. Second, Lincoln has a slightly higher average cost for personnel. Third, Lincoln has participated in the METCO program to a proportionally greater degree than comparable communities. The Task Force has undertaken a quantitative analysis of the cost of this program.

The Task Force does not find any significant difference between Lincoln's special education costs and the level of those costs elsewhere. The Task Force finds that Lincoln's administrative costs are comparable to other towns, perhaps even slightly lower.

In addition to the cost factors mentioned above there are numerous differences between specific educational policies in Lincoln and those elsewhere that do have cost implications. None of these differences is large. However, in the current difficult fiscal climate, all avenues for cost saving should be explored. The Task Force has developed recommendations related to all areas of our charge, including technology and use of instructional assistants, in addition to the topics mentioned above.

## *Educational Practices Overview*

The high quality of the Lincoln Schools is due to the dedication of its staff of teachers and administrators. Lincoln benefits from the METCO program in ways that are hard to quantify but are nonetheless very important.

The Task Force finds that in the middle school grades, Lincoln provides less time in core academic subjects than its peer towns. We recognize the value of the physical, social and academic development that results from children's participation in art, music, physical education and the like and the need to strike an appropriate balance between these important activities and other parts of the curriculum. We recommend a shift in the allocation of students' time in the middle school grades toward English, Math, Science, History/Social Studies and Foreign Languages, without sacrificing a strong commitment to co-curricular subjects.

The Task Force finds that the recent budget cuts have resulted in a technology system that is outdated and difficult to use. We recommend that this situation be redressed on a one-time basis and suggest a more systematic approach to planning for technology in the future.

## *Recommendations*

With respect to each of the points in our charge, the Task Force makes the following specific recommendations. The full report includes findings for each area and a discussion that provides detailed data and analysis supporting the findings and recommendations.

### Class size:

- The policy of small target class sizes should be continued.
- The current maximum class sizes should be maintained.
- The School Committee should consider strategies to achieve the target class sizes by smoothing out fluctuations due to the year-to-year variability in age cohorts. Such strategies might include combining classes across grades or increasing the flexibility of middle school teams.
- In the middle school, target class sizes might be achieved by combining classes in particular subjects, lengthening the period of instruction, reducing the number of periods per day, and other organizational ideas.

### Teacher Salary and Seniority Structure:

- Lincoln should increase the opportunities for the professional advancement of its teachers. These opportunities should be concentrated on the acquisition of specific new knowledge that can be brought into the classroom and specific additional skills.
- Lincoln should continue its practice of seeking out well-qualified teachers, including those at the beginning of their careers, as part of its hiring program.

### Allocation of Teachers' and Students' Time:

- The School Committee and administration should take a close look at the schedule of the core teaching team in the middle school grades, to insure that scheduling and organization of the school program make best use of time, allowing sufficient but not excessive planning time, and insuring a rigorous academic program, balanced with children's other educational and developmental needs.

#### Middle School Model:

- The School Committee should consider modifying the current single-grade four-member team approach where small class sizes create inefficiencies.
- The School Committee should explore a variety of means to increase the time allocated to Math, Science, English, History/Social Studies and Foreign Languages in the curriculum of the middle school grades.

#### Instructional Assistants:

- The School Committee should review the use of instructional assistants in grades three and higher.

#### Technology:

- The School Committee should develop a multi-year plan to standardize the computers in use in the schools, not necessarily to incorporate the latest technology.
- The School Committee should examine the uses of technology to achieve economies of scale in special education, and thereby provide differentiated instruction suitable for many students.
- The Town should consider a Warrant Article that would allow the Schools to upgrade its computer systems on a one-time basis, and that following this upgrade, future expenses for computers and related systems be incorporated into the School's annual operating budget, instead of the capital budget.

#### Special Education:

- The School system should continue its practice of intensive early identification and service provision of children with special needs.
- The Lincoln Schools should continue to investigate innovative ways of adapting the standard curricula for a variety of learning styles. Special education services are mandated not by a child's diagnosis, but by the child's inability to make progress through the curriculum. If the standard curriculum moves increasingly away from "one size fits all" to a variety of learning styles being accommodated, the need for traditional special education services declines.

#### METCO:

- The Task Force makes no specific recommendation with respect to prospective changes in the METCO program itself. We have heard from all quarters about the value of the program to Lincoln children and to Boston children. We present an analysis of the dollar cost of this program so that the program's benefits can be evaluated and publicly discussed in light of these costs.
- The School Committee should utilize this marginal cost methodology to evaluate the financial impact of any contemplated changes in enrollment policy.

#### Administration:

- The Task Force does not have any specific recommendations with regard to changes in the School's administration.

Lincoln Schools K-8 Task Force members: Lesley Allison, Jerry Green (Chair), Ralph Derbyshire (Secretary), Beth Lerman, Katherine McHugh, Jurrien Timmer and David Urion

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**Report to be presented at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, November 20, 2002  
in the Donaldson Auditorium at the Brooks School**