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## High school still accredited, for now

By **Katie Liesener**/ Staff Writer  
Thursday, December 22, 2005

**N**ormally, the continued accreditation of a school would be good news to school officials. But not when it comes with strings attached.

In its decision to continue to accredit Wayland High School, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) has requested a special progress report from the school district, detailing how and when it will address the association's space, health and safety concerns with school facilities.

The NEASC, which evaluates New England high schools every 10 years, is giving the school district until April 1 to provide that detailed timeline. If the district does not adequately follow through with its proposed solutions within five years, the NEASC has the power to place the school on warning or probation.

"The accreditation process ... puts a lot of pressure on us," said Superintendent Gary Burton. "We can't deny these problems are real, but we're still confronted with what to do about them - with no money to spend and a town still divided."

The accreditation report comes in the midst of a heated debate over the extent of the high school's needs and various ways to address them. The NEASC's assessment of the high school's strengths and weaknesses was based on a four-day site visit by the association's own 15-member team, as well as on a 12-month self-study provided by school staff.

The NEASC report praised the high school for its significant number of co-curricular activities, faculty excellence, extensive writing opportunities for students, open campus model, media center and academic center, among other things.

But it also listed nearly as many concerns as commendations - all related to the quality of the school's facilities.

Those concerns included "severe overcrowding," heating and ventilation systems that compromise air quality, substandard drainage in some athletic fields, inadequate storage space, lack of handicapped accessibility in some areas, and failure to comply with fire, health and safety regulations.

According to Janet Allison, deputy director of the NEASC Commission on Public Secondary Schools, facility problems of the kind that Wayland faces are "not extremely unusual," particularly for schools with older buildings.

"We have a number of schools with longstanding facility issues," she said. "Some are resolved and others are in the process of being resolved."

Allison could not specify which safety regulations Wayland High School's facilities had failed to meet or by what margin, saying, "The board's standards are very qualitative."

But according to Wayland High School Principal Charlie Ruopp, a co-author of the self-study that fed into the NEASC report, examples of code violations include an inadequate number of fire extinguishers (now remedied), broken exit signs, too-narrow corridors for safe evacuation, and a deficient number of electrical outlets for the amount of electrical use of some rooms.

"We have a big homework assignment in front of us," said Burton, who pointed to the lack of a sprinkler system as one example of the difficulties involved in addressing the report's recommendations.

Installing a sprinkler system, he said, would involve raising the buildings' ceilings several feet to meet safety codes. But because the school's ceilings are made of concrete, such a procedure would involve costly reconstruction, he said.

The accreditation report added a pessimistic note to Monday night's joint meeting of the School Committee and Board of Selectmen. The two boards wrestled with how many of the cited problems they could propose to fix without the guarantee of a new building.

"It does sound silly to put Band-Aids on ... a building we hope to replace," said School Committee member Louis Jurist, though committee members agreed they would likely have to make certain repairs to appease the NEASC and retain the school's accreditation.

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Selectman Bill Whitney expressed hope that the accreditation report would provide an "added push" for the construction of a new high school as a long-term solution.

In an interview, Burton said school officials are still reacting to the NEASC findings, and that any short-term solutions to satisfy the special progress report will be presented as part of their proposed budget at the Jan. 9 School Committee meeting.

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