



The Newton North Learning Commons

Advancing Achievement and Innovation in a New High School

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Newton North High School
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Background

We are planning to move our school library into a new high school that will be completed in June 2010. The move offers a unique opportunity to embrace the seismic changes that are underway in the way we read, the way we learn, and the way we teach. In the new Newton North High School, the library will be transformed and renamed as the Newton North Learning Commons. The name change helps to define our program as more than a book and information repository. While many aspects of the Learning Commons model are already evident in our day to day operation, the new space will act as a catalyst for expanding this vision. We are still a school library. We continue to provide resources related to the entire school curriculum in many formats. We teach and collaborate with teachers in all departments. We offer and promote books that students love to read. While much of what follows describes what we are already doing, we look forward to continuing to reach toward our goals in the new building.

In a nutshell

The Learning Commons is a dynamic space centered on the learner. The physical space is defined flexibly by the needs of students and staff. The virtual space is open 24/7, providing access to a vast and growing body of knowledge. The website is defined primarily by the students but also by the rest of the school community. Principles of open access, inquiry, creativity and sharing are encouraged. The Learning Commons brings us together. As departments work more cooperatively, the Learning Commons becomes the place to share ideas. It is a showcase for best practices, student work, and performances. It is an open studio for knowledge creation. It is a professional melting pot for faculty.

Why the 'learning commons'?

The word 'commons' has been used frequently in recent years. With vast growth of shared information available, definitions of ownership and even knowledge are changing.

Creativecommons.org is a non-profit whose mission is to "increase the amount of creativity (cultural, educational, and scientific content) in 'the commons' — the body of work that is available to the public for free and legal sharing, use, repurposing, and remixing." And it's fitting that we are in the *Commonwealth* of Massachusetts, only miles from Boston *Common*. One definition of 'commonwealth' is the "concept that everything that is not owned by specific individuals or groups is owned collectively by everyone in the governmental unit, as opposed to a *state*, where the state itself owns such things." (Wiktionary) Applied to the school library, the Learning Commons doesn't 'own' its books; but it acts as a custodian and a promoter of the

collection. The "learning commons" is an evolution of school libraries, where active *learning* is our focus, as opposed to simply maintaining collections.

Space Considerations

The new space allows students to work effectively in groups. Modular and movable furniture is used to create spaces for large and small groups. The individual is still valued. There are quiet spaces to read and reflect. And the work of students is showcased, both in the room and online. The entire community is encouraged to create accounts on the website, through which they can add content, connect with one another, access passwords for remote use of databases, and offer recommendations. The website is not the "librarians' website". It's a platform for participation and engagement for the entire school community--a community empowered by a digital library that is available at any time, and from anywhere a computer or mobile device is online.

Designed for the 21st Century Learner

Research has demonstrated that students who are actively engaged in their learning outperform students who are taught by rote. The Learning Commons is a place where groups of students investigate and problem-solve in self-defined directions, limited only by the creativity of their questioning. Contrast this to trying to deliver a homogeneous lesson, where everyone reads from the same chapter in the same textbook. The Learning Commons provides limitless ways to learn, and limitless ways to creatively engage students under state and national curriculum standards. Multiple media formats and adaptive space opens up new possibilities to teachers as they plan their lessons. Forward thinkers such as Daniel Pink and Theodore Sizer warn that either we encourage innovation or we fail. It's not *what* kids are thinking, but *how* they are thinking.

Measuring Success

Success under this new model is measured by student achievement. For example, the Learning Commons can act as a 'test box'. Does the student's idea or project hold up to public scrutiny? Put it on display and open a discussion on the website. Solicit advice from experts in the subject under study. Gather informal and classroom surveys for constructive feedback so library teachers can continually improve the program. The Learning Commons provides a forum for students to discuss *how* they are learning.

Recent projects in the Learning Commons:

- [Human Body wiki](#), created by 10th grade Active Chemistry students, introduces anatomy to their peers. The pages cross reference each other. Students determine the objectives, design and standards in a manner that achieves the goals set out by the teacher. The wiki allows for discussions and sharing of ideas. Contributions are made by students across different classes, semesters, and school years.

- The [Senior Year Project](#) meets every day in the Learning Commons. Projects are self-determined by students. Each student works closely with the SYP teacher, a faculty advisor, and a library teacher. The [SYP has a wiki](#) which is used for communication and organization, a virtual whiteboard for individual and group use. The Learning Commons website is used by students to collect survey data from peers.
- Students in the Earth, Labs and Literature course [showcased picture books](#) they created to introduce environmental concepts to children.
- Modeled after the 'staff favorites' shelf at the local bookstore, students created posters describing **10 great books** they chose to read.

Old Model

- Library teachers teach students how to find quality information
- Library teachers show students how to use technology to access databases
- Everyone must be quiet!
- Areas defined by stacks, computers, and tables
- Books are stored in the stacks
- Students assemble 2D projects on posterboard
- Students present projects to their class
- Eurocentric collection

New Model

- Library teachers coach students in acquiring, creating, and sharing knowledge*
- Library teachers, subject teachers and students explore the uses and implications of state of the art technology
- Multiple, flexible spaces allow for a variety of simultaneous learning environments*
- Changeable areas defined by affinity groups, classes, and subjects
- Entire collection is used every year
- Students create multimedia presentations, borrowing from text, audio, video *
- Students present projects to the public in the Learning Commons *
- Globally focused collection

** already in practice*

Highlights of the Newton North Learning Commons

Main Area

The main room will be bordered by bookshelves on the walls. The other half of the print collection will be on wheels. 47" high mobile shelves (not book carts) have the dual purpose of defining spaces and delivering the collection to different areas. Great effort has been made so that little is tied down. The 'floor' of the library can be arranged so that a large group can assemble to watch a performance, or so several classes or other groups could access the collection in a way that won't disturb individuals. Features of the main room:

- Projector and screen
- Comfortable, lounge seating
- Bistro-style cafe seating
- Flat-screen display for student work, upcoming events, latest acquisitions, etc.
- Available for borrowing:
 - iPads
 - iPod touches
 - E-readers
 - Laptops

Classrooms

The larger of two classrooms will have 25 desktop computers. It is large enough to allow for many configurations of the computers (rows or along the walls), and so that mobile shelving can be brought in. The purpose of this classroom is to allow for self-contained library instruction without distraction from the main floor. The smaller classroom is even more flexibly designed for mobile devices. Available for student use in the classrooms (and elsewhere in the commons):

- Cart of 20 laptops
- iPads
- ipod touches
- Flip video cameras
- E-readers
- Projector and screen
- Interactive whiteboard

"Media Watch Room"

This glassed-in side room might also be called the 'Global Reference Room' or the 'Situation Room'. The purpose of the room is to provide a current up-to-the-minute window on the world. It will include:

- A large flat panel screen with cable TV access
- Display of front-pages from newspapers around the world (modeled after the Newseum's exhibit)
- Print subscriptions to domestic and international newspapers
- Access to global reference databases, including language translation and multilingual encyclopedias
- Access to government and civic information
- Posted ethical questions, periodically changing, on current issues and the media

"Creativity Commons Room"

The purpose of this room is to provide everything students need to create projects, including workstations and office supplies:

- Open-source creativity software (examples)
 - Gimp (photo editing)
 - Digital mind-mapping / graphic organizers (eg. bubbl.us)
 - Voice Thread
 - Toondoo (comic strip creator)
 - Wordle
 - Google Docs
 - Google Earth
- Commercial creativity software (examples)
 - Adobe Creativity Suite (Illustrator, Photoshop, InDesign, Flash, etc.)
 - Microsoft Office
 - Dreamweaver
 - iMovie
 - GarageBand
 - iTunes
- A color printer
- Scanner
- Office supplies (staplers, glue, paint, markers, etc. etc.).

"Professional Resource Room"

This room is the center of our Professional Learning Communities, where cross-department collaboration and sharing of ideas will take place. It will provide access to professional journals and books in both print and electronic form, and a video library.

NNHS Local History Archive

The school archives includes documents related to the history of Newton High School and the old Newton North High School. The collection includes a complete run of yearbooks back to 1911, and a complete run in bound volumes of the Newtonite (1923 to present). Also prominent in the collection are athletic photographs, records of the Newton Technical High School, the "Orange Books" (annual school handbook), graduation programs, and more. This oblong room has glassed display walls on either end for exhibiting documents and artifacts to both the outside hallway and into the library. The exhibits will be conceived of, and designed by students interns interested in Museum studies and local history. Students will be encouraged to research using the archives. The archives will also include:

- a scanner
- a desktop computer
- a color printer

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