

DEMOGRAPHICS

Lexington looks to the west coast

By Al Gentile
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In the search for how to deal with changing student demographics, Lexington is looking to the West Coast.

"This has been a community effort," said Dan Krupka, a member of the 29% Vision Committee.

The group works to develop long-term plans to deal with Lexington's changing demographics.

On Sept. 29, three leaders from the Walnut Valley United School District in Los Angeles County, CA, spoke to town officials, community leaders, and concerned parents.

The meeting stems from work done by the 29% Vision Committee's subcommittee on Asian communities. Currently about 31 percent of Lexington students are of Asian descent, while the California district has about 61 percent.

Superintendent of the Walnut Valley United School District Robert Taylor, along with staff, have developed several different ways of dealing with the demographic shift, which took place largely in the last 25 years.

Taylor's district developed the Diversity Thinktank, a group of various stakeholders in the community to explore the cultural, emotional, and societal norms of other cultures.

"It's an opportunity for various stakeholders to come together and talk about cultural norms, beliefs, experiences," Taylor said. "It's been really successful."

Taylor said when dealing with fostering acceptance of other cultures, developing empathy is at the top of the list.

"I think that's one of the most underrated leadership skills," Taylor said.

Taylor praised training for teachers and staff offered by the Anti-Defamation League, an international group which offers training for racism and other forms of intolerance.

"We found that the training dealt with theory, empathy, and practical ideas," Taylor said. "We have had zero pieces of negative feedback [from teachers]."

Helen Hall, the president of the Walnut Valley school board, said her long career on the board has been dominated by adapting to the district's changing demographics. The biggest part of dealing with that change was inclusiveness, Hall said.

Hall said that balance was key to her district's successes.

"We always felt it was important to have all of the groups involved in the community and in the district," Hall said. "Don't do it isolated, but don't get so much input that you don't

get anything done. You want the parents to feel like they're part of the district, part of the community."

Hall made a point to explain the difficulty of dealing with demographic change does not come from the students.

"Sometimes change can be challenging," Hall said. "Our kids have no problems adjusting to change and diversity. It's really the adults."

Recently, the Lexington School Committee voted to table future plans of developing an world language program for elementary schools. At Walnut Valley, students from first to third grade learn in a dual-immersion program, where students work half the day in Mandarin, and half in English.

This, Taylor said, both address standard English speakers and English language learners in a cost-effective way.

"You could be a Caucasian kid, a Hispanic kid, an African-American kid, you will be fluent in Mandarin," Taylor said. "It blows me away with their level of proficiency."

Costs for the program are much smaller than having a dedicated foreign language program, Taylor said. Teachers who are bilingual simply only need materials typically used in Mandarin-speaking districts.

District comparison at a glance

District	Total Student Population	Approximate Budget	Percentage of Asian Students
Lexington	About 7,100	About \$118 million	About 31 %
Walnut Valley	About 14,000	About \$140 million	About 61 %