

Another topic of continued interest to the AB parent population has been the relatively new, "990" mandate. The impetus behind this issue's main article resulted from parental feedback questioning how this is has been working since its formal implementation last September. The primary goal of each In Focus issue is to provide an article on an area of parental mass appeal. Please forward any topic you would like to see probed in the future to <http://abrptso.ab.mec.edu>. Thank you — Dawn Gomez

AB's Response to Massachusetts' 990 Time and Learning Requirements *A Conversation with Kirsten Kunz, AB's 990 Coordinator*

By Martha Rounds

"990." It's a number sure to provoke a reaction from almost any part of the high school's extended community: administration, teachers, parents, students, school committee, or town voters. According to the Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE), "to ensure a minimum base of learning time for all students in the Commonwealth, annual hourly requirements have been established."

Because elementary and junior high school students spend all their time in a directed learning environment in contact with teachers, they automatically fulfill the state's annual hourly learning requirement. In contrast, at the high school, by design, students have more freedom to design their learning experience; this has run counter to the DOE mandate. In the past two years, AB's administration and teachers have spent a substantial amount of time addressing the state's 990 Time and Learning Requirements.

AB's implementation of "990" has been the source of much confusion and consternation in both the parent and student communities. Here, we set the record straight so that both students and their parents know what students need to do to comply with 990 requirements. Kirsten Kunz, Acton-

Boxborough Regional High School's 990 coordinator, provided answers to the following questions.

What's the history of 990's implementation at AB?

The 990 mandate was originally part of the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act, and was supposed to be implemented by all secondary schools by 1997. Due to philosophical conflicts, and space and financial constraints, the district determined that it was not in the best interest of AB students to meet the mandate at the high school level in the recommended fashion or time frame. ABRHS underwent a Coordinated Program Review in 2004–2005, at which time the school district developed a second action plan to implement the time and learning requirements by September 2008. In August 2006, the DOE responded that this was not acceptable, and gave the district a December 2006 deadline to submit a plan for full implementation of the 990-hour requirement for each student beginning in the 2007–08 school year.

How did the school budget affect the high school's 990 compliance?

The state's proposal would require every student to sit in a seat in a classroom with under 30 students for seven periods per

day, thereby requiring AB to hire about sixteen new teachers. Even though there's theoretically enough room in the building, we don't have anywhere near the budget to increase our staff to that extent.

How did the administration balance budgetary limitations with the state's mandate?

We used the 990 mandate as an incentive to improve our programming. Previously, AB's 80-credit graduation requirement was one of the lowest in the state. There was a fraction of our population who filled these minimum requirements and tended not to have a lot of classroom hours, heavy duty homework or outside activities. So, when we were faced with having to implement 990, we chose to address that group as the student population best served with a 990 mandate, because it would force them to use the school's resources more fully.

Were there students whose schedules were in compliance with 990?

It has always been possible to achieve 990 hours at AB. Only about 16% of the students prior to the 990 mandate were choosing this on their own. However, according to the mandate, a student could take five demanding courses, complete five hours of

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homework a night, get into a competitive college, and still not meet 990. There was some outrage in the fact that we were offering quality education and something that was appealing to colleges and yet the state said this is not adequate.

What students were not taking full advantage of the school's offerings?

As they progress through school, many students move towards doing things on the outside. This group tends to be students who are interested in work-study and transitioning to the work world, students who want to take four rigorous classes as seniors whose homework makes them too busy to take electives, or students who are deeply involved in an outside activity like theater, dance, etc.

Some faculty and parents had been pushing for higher credit requirements: if the state average is 100–110 credits, people wondered why we're not on the same page; also, there were people who didn't want their seniors with a lot of free time on their hands. These various groups thought we should be moving this way, and 990 helped us push that over the edge.

How did AB balance its philosophy, the perceived needs of "underserved" students and the 990 mandate?

We looked at hiring new teachers and adding new electives in order to bump up students' interest and sign on to more coursework. For some it meant more hands-on, practical classes; for others it meant curriculum they could access more readily, for example, in the school's growing limited English proficient group. We went for unlevelled electives—courses that didn't have a lot of homework, courses that were of broad interest ranging from forensic science to oceanography—as opposed to adding more leveled classes that would appeal to kids who were already taking maximum advantage of what the high school offers.

Second, we instituted directed studies, which the state allows as part of 990 hours.

It's OK to go into a room and do work under the supervision, support, direction of a certified teacher. We did that for a relatively low cost, utilizing existing professionals. The budget for that was \$32,000.

Third, we instituted a system to help kids recognize that there are lots of things that they're doing that people would consider co-curricular, or augmenting what they do during the school day: community service, formal learning outside of school through independent agencies, or taking outside courses on their own with parent approval.

How is the policy for freshmen different?

Freshmen can count only academic courses and directed studies toward 990 so that they must be in a classroom 7 periods per day. This is to help them transition to the high school environment and develop good time management and study skills.

Has the school made other adjustments to ensure students' compliance with 990?

For the upcoming year, classes in four different departments—English, social studies, science and world language—have added portfolios. The state does not allow us to count homework towards 990, so there is a distinction between the production of a portfolio and homework. So, for example, if you take an English class, which has 141 hours of seat time, it's now worth 171 hours because that class has been structured such that we can document and recognize the work that goes into the portfolio. Given the fact that these four core subjects are classes that most students take every year, each student gets 120 additional hours from portfolio requirements alone. This makes it much easier for students to achieve 990 hours

What kinds of co-curricular activities does AB count towards 990 compliance?

The state mandate requires that co-curricular activities be directly tied to our curriculum. For instance, a student may be taking Senior Seminar, which includes practical car maintenance, and then helping

a parent with that kind of activity at home. Many students follow politics and are concurrently taking a political science class; as long as it's tied into courses they have or are taking, their hours and experience qualify.

It's my job to sort out and document what's valuable experience and what's not. I meet with each individual student to discuss and document their experience.

Are activities like sports, drama and music included in the 990 mandate?

The biggest letdown for many AB students is that the state does not recognize direct sports involvement as structured learning time. However, if they're doing things like teaching gymnastics, coaching, organizing sports leagues or clinics, or learning about the business operations of a gym, there are ways that we can tie those to our curriculum and include those hours as co-curricular learning experiences.

Hours spent doing drama, music and other school-related activities are often acceptable.

Is there a list of acceptable co-curricular activities?

There is not a definitive list. Each student goes through an open interview process. That is intentional, so that we don't discourage kids from exploring what they do. Without the discussion with a student, an outsider might not understand how much time, thought and learning went into a particular activity. Some students might begin their interview thinking they hadn't done anything, but the discussion helps them see the ways that learning outside the confines of the school is beneficial and yet still connected to our mission.

What are the consequences for students who do not meet the state's 990 requirement?

The 990 mandate has no state mandated consequences for individual students who do not meet the requirements. If a student chooses not to comply, there's no punish-

ment from the state. However, they must comply with AB's 100-credit graduation requirement.

What are consequences for AB if it does not comply with 990 as an institution, and how does the state ensure compliance?

If AB does not follow the law, it could jeopardize state funding. The state can come in at any time and audit the school. There's an annual review based on the principal's report. They want to see examples of how students are complying, they examine our system and how we monitor and work with students. There is strict oversight by the state, and AB cannot refuse to comply without possible significant budgetary consequences.

How else does the 990 mandate support AB's educational mission?

It reminds students that education is not just hours spent in the building, but education includes their decisions about how they choose to spend free time, what interests and jobs they take up, and what activities feel good to them. It helps kids think through what they are doing to be an adult.

School Committee Response

During the 2006–2007 year, Superintendent Bill Ryan notified the Regional School Committee that the state was going to enforce the 990 hour mandate for the High School many committee members were concerned that requiring students to “attend” more class hours would reduce the openness that the Regional School District encourages.

The committee heard from Principal Steve Donovan on the approach he was taking to institute the 990 mandate. The School Committee agreed with the plan and the expense to implement it. For the rest of the school year, the committee heard from parents voicing their concerns for the 990 mandate and quite frankly many committee members continued to question the necessity of the mandate as well the current implementation.

As a result, the School Committee decided to establish the 990 subcommittee to explore options for the meeting the mandate. The goal of the subcommittee was to research how other school districts meet the 990 mandate, interview AB administrators, and hold public forums to allow the community to voice their opinion about the mandate. The results would be presented to the School Committee at which time the committee would determine if it believed any changes would be warranted.

The subcommittee's progress has been slow for a variety of reasons so at this point in time the members of the sub-committee do not expect to present their findings until the next school year. Please stay tuned next year for the results of the subcommittee. The good news is that as the community has become more comfortable with the 990 requirements, the number of concerns voiced has declined.

One final note, I would like to take this time to thank the community for supporting the Regional Schools District's budget for the 2009 fiscal year. Your continued support will allow the school district to deliver the top quality educational programs the community expects. Thank you.

— Bruce Sabot, School Committee Chair

High School Response: HOW A-B TRACKS 990 HOURS

In order to implement tracking and reporting for 990, new monitoring software was developed. Students first generate a “990” plan in conjunction with academic course selection for the upcoming year. Students submit a plan with course selections. All students' 990 status is checked during the summer months and any student who needs hours for compliance is scheduled for directed study automatically. Students all begin the academic year with a plan that meets the requirement.

As students modify any academic or directed study schedules, they are required by counselors to check their 990 status with Kirsten Kunz, and appropriate adjust-

ments are made. Printed verifications of student co-curricular activity plans are distributed with first term report cards to remind students of their commitments. Students should make any modifications to their year's activity plan at that time. A student's involvement in co-curricular activities at the high school is verified with activity advisors periodically throughout the year. A student's independent plans are agreed upon with parent or guardian approval (signature) and it is expected that students will follow through with parent/guardian oversight. If a student's counselor, assistant principal, or parent feels that a time and learning plan is bet-

ter accomplished with direct school supervision, then that can be accomplished with traditional school day options.

Since 990 requirements are not necessarily all fulfilled with credit-bearing courses, they are not included on the report card. Students are only notified of their 990 status if their plans fall below the requirement at any time. Any questions about this process can be directed to Kirsten Kunz (kkunz@mail.ab.mec.edu).

— Kristen Kunz, 990 Coordinator
Kay Steeves, Student/Faculty Support Coordinator

MAY / JUNE 2008

INFOCUS

**Newsletter of the Acton-Boxborough Regional
Schools Parent-Teacher-Student Organization**

Acton-Boxborough Regional High School
Acton, MA 01720

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- **check inside for pull out calendar**
- **see <http://abrptso.ab.mec.edu>**
for more news or to send feedback

PTSO Annual Meeting

Thursday, May 15, 7PM RJG Junior High Auditorium

“Surviving the College Search” A Panel of ABRHS Seniors and Their Parents

Thurs., May 15, 7:30 PM RJG Junior High Auditorium

Are you worried about how you and your child will navigate the college search process successfully? Are there alternatives that you should consider? Panel members, representing a range of experiences and decisions, will share their stories and answer questions. Students and parents/guardians are welcome. Sponsored by the PTSO and ABRHS Counseling Department

The PTSO Board for 2008–2009

Members of the Nominating Committee are looking for people to fill several volunteer positions on the Board for next year. This is a great way to contribute to our schools! If you're interested in finding out more, please contact Mary Ann Ashton (MABAshton@aol.com) or Jan Couch (jccouch@comcast.net). The slate will be voted on at the PTSO meeting on May 15th at 7:00 p.m. in the RJG JH Auditorium. All parents/guardians are welcome to attend and vote.

ABRHS School Council Openings

There are three openings for parents on the ABRHS School Council for next year. The School Council meets monthly and acts as an advisory body for the principal. The School Council also has responsibility for approving a School Improvement Plan each year and monitoring progress against the plan. Any parent interested in running should forward a brief statement about his or her background and interests to Mary Ann Ashton (MABAshton@aol.com) by May 16. Election ballots will be distributed in June with a voting deadline of mid-June.



Friday, June 6th is fast approaching. Volunteers are still needed for many committees. Underclassmen parents are encouraged to help with this wonderful tradition. Please consider supporting the class of 2008 celebrate in this fun and safe way. **For more details, please contact Shaila Golikeri or Debbie Clough at ABProjGrad08@gmail.com**

MAY 2008

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<input type="checkbox"/> High School Schedule <input type="checkbox"/> Junior High School Schedule				1 Health and Fitness Day Interim Reports/Seniors 7:30PM Regional School Committee	2 7:23AM Senior Breakfast Community Service Day	3 SAT and Subject tests
				9AM–1PM 6th Grade Parent Visits	6:30–8:30PM 7th Grade Dance 9AM–1PM 6th Grade Parent Visits	
4	5 AP Exams 2:30PM Faculty Meeting	6 AP Exams	7 AP Exams 7:00PM Awards Night	8 AP Exams	9 AP Exams	10
			12:22PM Student Council 1PM 8th Grade Picture			
11	12 AP Exams	13 AP Exams	14 AP Exams Physical Ed Field Trip	15 AP Exams	16 AP Exams Interim Reports (9–11)	17
	MCAS		MCAS 7–8:30PM School Council 7:30PM Spring Band Concert			
18	19 6PM Class Competition Plays 7PM School Council	20	21 MCAS Math	22 MCAS Math	23 Senior English Finals 7PM Madrical Dinner	24 7PM Madrical Dinner
	MCAS		MCAS 7:30PM Spring Choral Concert			
25	26 Memorial Day NO SCHOOL	27 Senior English Finals Senior Outing/Kimballs	28 Senior Finals Periods 1 and 2 MCAS U.S. History	29 Senior Finals Periods 3 and 4 6PM PC Banquet	30 Senior Finals Periods 5 and 6	31
				Student Council Officer Elections Grade 7		

JUNE 2008

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1 <input type="checkbox"/> High School Schedule <input type="checkbox"/> Junior High School Schedule	2 Senior Finals Periods 7 and 8 2:30PM Faculty Meeting	3 MCAS Science 9:30AM Grad Rehearsal 7:00PM Scholarship Night	4 MCAS Science 9:30AM Grad Rehearsal 6:00PM Prom 12:22PM Student Council 7-8:30PM 6th Grade Social	5 9:30AM Grad Rehearsal (rain date) 7:30PM Regional School Committee	6 Graduation	7 SAT and Subject tests
8	9	10 10:00AM Summer Volunteer Opportunities Fair	11	12 English Finals	13 7:30PM Black Box Musical English Finals	14 7:30PM Black Box Musical
						7-9:30PM 8th Grade Graduation Dance
15	16 Finals Periods 1 and 2	17 Finals Periods 3 and 4	18 Finals Periods 5 and 6	19 Finals Periods 7 and 8 LAST DAY OF SCHOOL	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30					