



NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES, INC.  
COMMISSION ON INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

**VISITING COMMITTEE REPORT**

**Cotting School**

453 Concord Avenue  
Lexington, MA 02421 USA

**Mr. David Manzo**

*President / Executive Director*

**Ms. Ann Buckley**

*Curriculum Specialist / Director of Middle School  
Self-Study Coordinator*

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**Mr. Stephen Wilkins**

*Carroll School  
Head of School  
Chair*

**Dr. Sarah Glenn-Smith**

*The Learning Center for the Deaf  
CEO  
Assistant Chair*

**10/20/2019 - 10/23/2019**

# Roster of Team Members

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## Chair(s)

**Chair: Mr. Stephen Wilkins**

*Head of School*

Carroll School

Lincoln, MA

**Assistant Chair: Dr. Sarah Glenn-Smith**

*CEO*

The Learning Center for the Deaf

Framingham, MA

## VC Members

**Ms. Patti Bernheart**

*Dean of Educational Services*

New England Academy

Beverly, MA

**Mr. Edward Bosso**

*Superintendent*

Perkins School for the Blind

Watertown, MA

**Ms. Amanda Cudmore**

*Grade 8 Teacher*

The Islamic Academy for Peace

Methuen, MA

**Diane Gallagher Ph.D**

*Retired President, HMS School for Children with Cerebral Palsy, Philadelphia, PA.*

**Mr. Kurt Moellering**

*Upper School Division Head*

Carroll School

Lincoln, MA

**Mr. Noah Noyes**

*Executive Director*

Devereux Glenholme School

Washington, CT

**Mr. Vince Vincent**

*Associate Head of School*

The Woodhall School

Bethlehem, CT

# Introduction

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Founded in 1885, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Inc. (NEASC) is the nation's oldest accrediting agency. Since its inception in 1885, the Association has awarded accreditation to educational institutions in the six New England states that seek voluntary affiliation.

The governing body of NEASC is its Board of Trustees which oversees the work of three Commissions:

- Commission on International Education
- Commission on Independent Schools
- Commission on Public Schools

The evaluation program which the schools undergo is a three-fold process: the Self-Study conducted by the school, the evaluation by the Visiting Committee, and the follow-up program carried out by the school to implement the findings of its own Self-Study (Part II), and the valid recommendations of the Visiting Committee and the Commission. The Commission on Independent Schools oversees the entire process.

Each school is evaluated in terms of compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*, the quality of *Part II: Reflection, Recommendations, and Issues for Further Discussion*, and how well it is serving the needs of its students. Because each school is different, the base that undergirds the evaluation is the school's own statement of mission and core values.

# School Data Sheet

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## Mission

*Our Mission: To enable students with special needs to achieve their highest learning potential and level of independence.*

*Our Vision: Cotting School creates an inclusive community, which fosters academic achievement, skill development and social-emotional maturity. Cotting meets the unique needs of students with a broad spectrum of learning and communication disabilities, physical challenges and complex medical conditions by providing an array of integrated services. Cotting values partnerships among students and families, staff, public funding agencies, donors and volunteers. Cotting provides outreach services, nationally and internationally, to expand our commitment and expertise in the field of special education. Cotting designs its day and residential training programs to enable students to realize their highest potential both during and after their enrollment.*

## History and Culture

*In 1893, two pioneering orthopedic surgeons from Children's Hospital in Boston, Dr. Augustus Thorndike and Dr. Edward Bradford, saw the need to educate children whose physical challenges prevented them from attending school. As an experiment, they founded The Industrial School for Crippled and Deformed Children in Boston. Modeled after 19th-century European institutions, the school was America's first for children with physical disabilities.*

*In the fall of 1894, the school opened in a donated basement space at St. Andrew's Parish House, 38 Chambers Street, Boston, Massachusetts. There, volunteer Mary M. Perry served as the School's first teacher and superintendent for seven students. With a full day of academics, a noon meal purchased on credit extended from S. S. Pierce, and a horse-drawn carriage to transport students on loan from the Armstrong Livery Service, America's first private, free, day school for children with physical disabilities was born.*

*Thanks to Co-founders Doctors Bradford and Thorndike and Board Chairman, Francis Joy Cotting, by 1904 the School was housed in a debt-free, magnificently constructed building at 241 St. Botolph Street. By 1907 the trustees bought land adjacent to the building to serve as a playground, and by 1911 the School accommodated 100 pupils. Tuition, a hot lunch and transportation continued to be free.*

*From its earliest years, the school day balanced academic lessons, industrial training, and enrichment activities. Medical care was provided by a visiting nurse. In 1922 additional property was purchased on St. Botolph Street, and by 1926 a new building more than doubled the size of the School, enabling extensive vocational training programs to be offered. The addition included a new high school, expanded industrial training areas, a more modern kitchen, and a new assembly hall. There was also more room for the Medical Department, which by this point included several doctors, nurses, and physiotherapists.*

*By 1959 the School had grown to serve 120 students from 36 communities. 1959 also marked a major shift for the School. In former years, the School cared primarily for children with polio or its effects. With the introduction of the Salk polio vaccine, the School began to experience increased enrollment of children with other conditions —such as cerebral palsy and spina bifida— that necessitated a larger and differently trained medical staff. The School took steps to better serve these students, including revising the curriculum, introducing new courses, purchasing modern equipment, hiring additional staff, and expanding the School's athletic, enrichment, and recreational offerings in an effort to better educate the “whole child.”*

*The original name of the School (the Industrial School for Crippled and Deformed Children) reflects a point in the history of the categorization of individuals with disabilities in the United States. Subsequent name changes continued to reflect evolving attitudes. The name of the School transitioned to the Industrial School for Crippled*

*Children (1948), the Cotting School for Handicapped Children (1974), and finally to Cotting School in 1986.*

*Under the leadership of President Carl Mores and Board Chairman William Taylor, Cotting sold the Boston property to the New England Conservatory of Music in 1987 and moved to Lexington, where a fourteen-acre campus in a suburban setting provided students the opportunity for more outdoor recreation and a new, spacious, fully accessible, light-filled facility.*

*Cotting School now serves students from ages 3 to 22 in a warm, nurturing, and therapeutic environment conducive to learning and social/emotional growth. All of our students benefit from individual and small group instruction, which enables students to demonstrate what he or she does best and how he or she learns. Teachers, assistants and therapists work as a team to help each student reach his or her own goals.*

*In addition to traditional academics, students visit other classrooms for age-appropriate enrichment activities such as music, art, adapted physical education, library, pre-vocational programming and health. Each class gives students the opportunity to gain knowledge, develop their skills and interests, and offer unique ways to express themselves. State-of-the-art computer and assistive technology is readily available and integrated into the classroom and curriculum. The students also enjoy practicing their independence throughout our fully accessible building, outdoor playground, gymnasium and playing fields.*

*Our students also have therapy services integrated into their school day. Classroom teachers work closely with therapists to ensure that students are gaining skills that will help them more effectively access the curriculum. Therapists might work with students in class, in their therapy area or with a small group of other children.*

*We expect our students to reach the highest level of academic achievement and independence that all of their skills allow. Our community-based instruction is an opportunity for students in the Middle and Upper Schools to visit a variety of settings in which to practice their skills. As students grow in their abilities, we give them more and more opportunities to apply their skills in real life settings such as community, work and home. Our Project Bridges Program empowers young people in the Upper School and Capstone areas of our program to view themselves as a vital part of the greater community through volunteer work experiences. Students contribute to the productivity and morale of worksites while advocating for their individual needs and applying their skills in a professional setting.*

*Most of our students are looking forward to being granted senior status, typically during their last full year at Cotting. As a senior, they are eligible to participate in a variety of special senior activities culminating in a graduation ceremony where they receive a diploma or certificate of completion.*

*Cotting School is a story of evolution. Since its founding, it has grown each year. Cotting is a place of contradictions and surprises. Here, sometimes things are not always as they appear to be. In many ways, the world often measures success the wrong way: where do you live, how many things do you own, how much money do you make or how much does your car cost? This is the wrong way to measure success.*

*Each of our students has special talents and our job is to bring those talents forward. There is great strength in our students. They each have a fighting spirit, an "I can do it" toughness that has helped each of them overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. At the same time there is tenderness in the many ways they treat others with kindness. When people come to visit the school for the first time, they often expect to see kids who suffer and staff who are tired. They find the opposite is true. Our students are happy, and our staff is energized and creative.*

*Cotting School is the story of adaptation and teamwork. It is the story of remembering and building upon our rich history and our successful work with children. But it is also about becoming something MORE each year, as we move forward together.*

## **Process Followed by School**

*Cotting School has endeavored to create as inclusive a self-study process as possible. After the January 2018 kickoff presentation by Jim Mooney, the school began the program review process. In department groups, all*

faculty members were asked to complete indicator checklists for standards 4, 5 and 6. Then, each group was asked to use the program review guidelines provided by NEASC to write a narrative description of their department's contribution to the total school program.

During our existing Wednesday afternoon professional development time, standards committees met and drafted their section of the self-study report. Each faculty member was assigned to a committee, based on preference. Members of Cotting's Instructional Leadership Team were asked to help facilitate the work of the groups. All school employees, students, parents, trustees and liaisons from all of Cotting's sending school districts were surveyed. The groups used data from all of these surveys, school publications and interviews to draft their reports.

A compiled version of all standard committee reports was shared with all employees. Each standard committee completed a survey about the Self-study process and their group's findings. One representative from each committee joined the Part 2 committee, charged with drawing together all of the issues and goals highlighted in the program reflections and standards reports.

The Part 2 committee reviewed all of the documentation again, with an eye to identifying common themes and priorities. Diversity, communication, behavior, transition and student outcomes rose to the forefront of every conversation. Each of these topics was represented with strengths, concerns and goals throughout the self-study. The group drafted a written report that was shared with the entire school community at orientation for the current school year, with opportunities for feedback.

The entire self-study report was shared with the school community again, prior to its submission.

## Overview of School Findings

Through the Self-study, the faculty, staff, students, parents and trustees of Cotting School found truth in our aspirations to create an inclusive community that fosters academic achievement, skill development and social-emotional maturity. We meet the unique needs of students with a broad spectrum of learning and communication disabilities, physical challenges and complex medical conditions by providing an array of integrated services. We value partnerships among students and families, staff, public funding agencies, donors, and volunteers.

Diversity, communication, behavior, transition and student outcomes rose to the forefront of every conversation. Each of these topics was represented with strengths, concerns and goals throughout the Self-study. As a community, we have been affirmed, challenged and energized to focus our continuous desire for improvement.

While there is always more work to be done, our findings will serve as reliable guides along the path of defining, as a school, who we are and where we want to be in the future.

## Legal/Regulatory Documentation

Visiting Team,

Full versions of all policies and handbooks will be available to team for review during your visit. To facilitate your materials review here, we have attached only those portions of the policy or manual that refers to the requested information in this section.

Thank you in advance,

Cotting School

### Related Files

- [2019-09-16-12:35\\_Cotting Tax Exemption.pdf](#)

- [2019-09-16-12:36 ST-5 Exemption Exp 01.02.25.pdf](#)
- [2019-09-16-12:37 HH Health Inspection 10.23.18.pdf](#)
- [2019-09-16-12:37 HH fire inspection-1.pdf](#)
- [2019-09-16-12:37 HH Health Inspection 3.22.18.pdf](#)
- [2019-09-16-12:37 HH Fire Alarm Inspection.pdf](#)
- [2019-09-16-12:50 11.1 HH Staff Policies Procedures Manual non-discrimination Requirements.docx](#)
- [2019-09-16-13:06 Cotting School Student Nondiscrimination - Admissions Handbook.docx](#)
- [2019-09-16-13:10 Cotting School Referral Process and Financial Responsibilities.docx](#)
- [2019-09-16-13:17 Cotting School Nondiscrimination employee policy.docx](#)
- [2019-09-16-13:21 Cotting School Food Service Inspection.pdf](#)
- [2019-09-16-14:37 Cotting School Emergency Plan.pdf](#)
- [2019-09-16-14:37 Cotting School Main Building Fire Alarm Test 8-15-19.pdf](#)
- [2019-09-16-14:47 Building Certificate.pdf](#)

# Introduction

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## Thanks to School

*Cotting School is a story of evolution. Since its founding, it has grown each year. Cotting is a place of contradictions and surprises. Here, sometimes things are not always as they appear to be. In many ways, the world often measures success the wrong way: where do you live, how many things do you own, how much money do you make or how much does your car cost? This is the wrong way to measure success. Each of our students has special talents and our job is to bring those talents forward. There is great strength in our students. They each have a fighting spirit, an "I can do it" toughness that has helped each of them overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. At the same time there is tenderness in the many ways they treat others with kindness. When people come to visit the school for the first time, they often expect to see kids who suffer and staff who are tired. They find the opposite is true. Our students are happy, and our staff is energized and creative. Cotting School is the story of adaptation and teamwork. It is the story of remembering and building upon our rich history and our successful work with children. But it is also about becoming something MORE each year, as we move forward together.*

The Visiting Committee was honored to spend three days immersed in the Cotting School community. The Study Coordinator, Ann Buckley, provided the committee with everything we needed at all times. The President, Chief Academic Officer, and Chief Operating Officer present a potent triad of leadership that is obvious in everything we experienced. This leadership team is heavily engaged in the daily life of the school, evidenced by their acknowledging each student on a first name basis. Their competence and dedication appear to make complex education and treatment seem relatively simple and expected. The Visiting Committee was met with candor and kindness every step of the way, making our work pleasurable and efficient. We are grateful to know the Cotting School community more completely.

Cotting School is a remarkably effective, nurturing, inclusive community comprised of wonderful, deserving students and their parents who benefit beyond measure from a large group of dedicated, highly skilled, resourceful, generous, engaging, and supremely caring faculty and staff. How is Cotting remarkably effective?

The Cotting School community:

- Provides a place to belong for each of its students
- Makes "difference" a natural part of the school day
- Seeks to meet the needs of each individual student
- Builds an integrated system of services
- Teaches skills at each student's achievable level
- Gives agency to each student regardless of any obstacles
- Cares for students with intensive needs
- Challenges students intellectually
- Creates a school designed specifically for each student
- Shows the world that "Cotting kids can"

## Overview of Team Findings

The Visiting Committee fell in love with the school. Instantly. The integrity of Cotting School permeates all aspects of this purposeful and patient program. Cotting's ability to respect every human being and differentiate program for each student is inspiring; they appear to hold an unshakable belief in the capacity of their students to make meaningful progress.

As the Visiting Committee conversed with virtually every constituent group during our time on campus (board, administration, parents, students, staff, faculty), the themes and commentary were remarkably consistent and



positive. President David Manzo expressed at our welcome dinner that the Cotting experience is defined by two words: awe and belonging. We were awed by the ability of Cotting to respond to and improvise for each student's needs at every moment. This creates a community in which every student truly belongs.

Everything about Cotting people and Cotting's physical spaces is uniquely designed for the benefit of the student population. There is complete agreement that there is only one top priority at Cotting. We were deeply impressed by the skills of faculty and staff who represent more than a one-to-one student-to-teacher ratio. Cotting educators possess stunning abilities to draw out their students to think and communicate. ABOVE AND BEYOND

Cotting has grown and changed dramatically since its last self-study in 2009. Perhaps most notable are the integration of services within the school, development of a continuum of services, expansion of assistive technology, significant integration of curriculum and vocational programming, a huge commitment to student trips into the community, the addition of a large medical staff, and the creation of Cotting Consulting. There is no question that Cotting's ability to grow and thrive is part of its essence.

The Visiting Committee found a school that took the re-accreditation process as a dedicated opportunity to further its effectiveness. Cotting was candid about the challenges facing the community: (1) defining clearly the diverse profiles and needs of the student population, (2) marketing the school to a low-incidence population of students/families in a way that sustains enrollment, (3) dealing with the reality of fewer young children being referred to Cotting, (4) the complex issues related to transition from Cotting, (5) explicit measurement of student outcomes, and (6) description of the value added of attending Cotting.

# Standard 1: Mission

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## Standard

There is congruence between the school's stated mission and core values and its actual program, policies, planning, and decision-making at both the operational and governance levels.

## Visiting Team's Assessment

**Standard Met (SM1, SM2):** The students' experience is supported.

**Standard Unmet (SU1, SU2):** The students' experience is compromised.

SM1. Standard Met: Evidences clear understanding, effective implementation and thorough planning for further improvement.

## Narrative Summary

**Brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to this standard. Text copied from the school's *Self-Study Report* is in italics.**

For over 125 years, the mission of Cotting School has been to treat children with a variety of disabilities with dignity, skill development, and optimism. Over the decades the precise language and labels used to describe Cotting children has evolved, but the mission remains unchanged. In the words of Cotting's President, "we are a school of evolution and invention." The deep commitment to children with physical challenges has been a constant amidst a broad range of other conditions including communication disorders, learning differences, and medical conditions. Cotting seeks to provide a happy and healthy daily experience for each student while also providing significant focus on individual skill development.

Cotting School grew out of an identified need by Boston-based doctors in the late 1800s for providing education to children with physical handicaps. A handful of families have been stewards of Cotting throughout its history, and they have made certain that the school was well governed, managed, and endowed. These families continue today to be important to the mission of the school. As the needs of children have changed over time, Cotting's program has adjusted. The mission, though, has not wavered.

*Our Mission: To enable students with special needs to achieve their highest learning potential and level of independence. Our Vision: Cotting School creates an inclusive community, which fosters academic achievement, skill development and social-emotional maturity. Cotting meets the unique needs of students with a broad spectrum of learning and communication disabilities, physical challenges and complex medical conditions by providing an array of integrated services. Cotting values partnerships among students and families, staff, public funding agencies, donors and volunteers. Cotting provides outreach services, nationally and internationally, to expand our commitment and expertise in the field of special education. Cotting designs its day and residential training programs to enable students to realize their highest potential both during and after their enrollment. Our Board of Trustees continues to be dynamically invested in the mission. The board votes on affirming the mission annually, and the mission statement is on the front page of each Board Book, received before each meeting. The Board has continued to support the creation of new positions and programs, which allow Cotting's planning and programming to be student-focused, with direct reflection of our mission. The mission of the school supports each of the following programs in supporting independence and reaching highest learning potential including:*

## **Observations**

The Visiting Committee was thoroughly impressed with the optimistic, kind, and conscientious essence of the school. The core mission of the school is understood universally by each faculty and staff member, even if there are minor points of discussion about precisely who is a Cotting profile student. Perhaps the essence of the mission can be boiled down to a collective commitment to do whatever is necessary and appropriate for the benefit of each child. There is a pervasive love for Cotting School's mission and Cotting's effectiveness from all constituents.

## **Commendations**

1. The Visiting Committee commends the Cotting community for a crystal clear mission that is exemplified in every facet of the school. Our sense is that, while it might be beneficial to post liberally the actual words in Cotting's mission statement around the campus, the walls, artwork, photos, classroom bulletin boards, the positive culture, and the faces of Cotting people more than adequately proclaim the profound nature of the mission.
2. The Visiting Committee commends the school for its work to define its mission in terms that the public can best understand. This effort relates to marketing, enrollment, consulting, and securing the Cotting brand. The recent work with a consulting firm appears to have enriched this work.

## **Recommendation 1**

Surveys conducted by the Cotting School for the self-study reveal extremely strong familiarity with the mission of the school. However, among parents, faculty, staff, local education administrators (referral sources), and board members, the breadth of the services provided by Cotting can lead to lack of clarity about the mission of the school. In making the mission understood by all constituents, we encourage the school to describe the diversity of the student population and programs as coherently as possible.

# Standard 2: Governance

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## Standard

The school has an appropriate system of governance that assures that the school remains true to its mission and that it has the necessary resources to support its present and prospective operations.

## Visiting Team's Assessment

**Standard Met (SM1, SM2): The students' experience is supported.**

**Standard Unmet (SU1, SU2): The students' experience is compromised.**

SM1. Standard Met: Evidences clear understanding, effective implementation and thorough planning for further improvement.

## Narrative Summary

**Brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to this standard. Text copied from the school's *Self-Study Report* is in italics.**

*Cotting School is strong in the area of governance. Currently, the Board of Trustees is comprised of six parents who have children with disabilities, including the parent of a current student. One member of the Board has a disability. Two members of the Board are descendants of the founders of our school. Members have experience in the following fields: legal, finance, non-profit management, business, medicine and education.*

*There is a formal Board Meeting each quarter (October, December, February and May) and additional meetings as needed. In addition, the Board has formal committees in the following areas: Investment/Finance, Audit, Governance and Development. Also, the Board Chair and the President meet one-to-one no fewer than four times per year to discuss school related issues.*

*In addition, there is notable diversity of skill sets within our principle governing body, the Board of Trustees. Currently, the Board of Trustees is comprised of six parents who have children with disabilities, including the parent of a current student. One member of the Board has a disability. Two members of the Board are descendants of the founders of our school. Members have experience in the following fields: legal, finance, non-profit management, business, medicine and education. There are both male and female members of the Board of Trustees.*

*The Board of Trustees provides oversight to the President of the School. The Board of Trustees is also responsible for the evaluation of and support for the professional growth of the School's President and encourages the President to sit on the Board of trade and advocacy organizations.*

*The Board receives and reviews the school policies and each year, in a formal vote, at the annual meeting the Board reviews and reaffirms the Mission of the School. In addition, they review and approve the school budget each year at the May Board Meeting. The Trustees annually review the schedule of insurance, employee benefits, comparative salary data, the audited financial statement, the IRS Form 990 and the school's retirement plan. One hundred percent of the Trustees of Cotting School participated in a self-evaluation process in 2018. One hundred percent of the Trustees support the school with a donation annually.*

*Cotting School is:*

*Continuous in its mission*

*Stable and ethical with regards to processes in place for transition of leadership*

*Strategic in its multi-year planning processes*

*Stable financially*

*Always working toward the future of the School so that it is known both nationally and internationally as an innovative provider of excellence to students with special needs*

*Supported by a strong and able Board*

*Continually evaluated and monitored throughout the year in recurrent, scheduled Board meetings*

*Setting a model of inclusive behavior through the Parent Handbook, Community Code of Respect, and the Employee Policy and Procedure*

## **Observations**

Discussions with parents, the Board Chair, Trustees, the President, and other members of the senior administrative leadership team, as well as survey data suggest that the governing structure currently in place provides adequate and appropriate oversight of The Cotting School. The available documents and interviews confirm that the Board is made up of individuals with a broad range of skills and expertise, and the sub-committees are active and engaged. The Board exhibits the self-awareness to make adjustments to the make-up of the Board, when necessary.

In conversations with the Board Chair it is evident that the Board has strategic priorities and is keenly aware of the need to continuously conduct external scans and remain adaptable and relevant in the face of a rapidly changing world.

The Investment/Finance Committee works closely with the Chief Financial Officer ("CFO"), and the President to make sure that funding priorities are in alignment with program needs. Because funding from local schools is somewhat unpredictable, this transparent and accessible approach demonstrated by the Cotting team is essential in making sure that there is long-term financial stability. The current financial stability of the organization, as well as the availability of endowment support and fundraising resources, are indicators that the governing structure is meeting this standard.

Interviews with the President and Administrative Leadership Team indicate that at Cotting, new policies are created to address needs as they arise and it is the responsibility of the administration to develop policies related to the school's educational programming. *All constituent groups, such as the Parent Advisory Committee, are encouraged to participate in the policy making process, as appropriate. The policies reviewed are clear and are shared with appropriate stakeholders in a transparent way. In addition, medical staff and administration update medical policies annually.*

Available documents (although a bit dated) indicate that the school has been involved in multi-year planning efforts and is currently engaged in the development of the next iteration of a strategic plan. A six member team (3 members of the Board and the Senior Leadership Team) are providing the leadership for the strategic planning process. The plan is primarily focused Cotting's evolution from a school to a "Continuum of Services" driven by work with the outside marketing consultant. The new strategic initiatives have been socialized with all staff and will be further discussed in small group meetings with faculty and staff. The major NEASC recommendations will also be integrated into the strategic plan. A Board retreat will take place in December to gather input from the full Board of Trustees.

The CAO and COO work closely with the President to oversee the school's programs and operations. It is clear that Cotting has a strong governing structure that is transparent and is functioning well.

## Conclusions and Explanation of Rating

The available documentation and information gathered in meeting and interviews indicate that the school has an appropriate system of governance that assures that the school remains true to its mission and that it has necessary resources to support its present and prospective operations. **Standard 2: Governance is being met at the SM1 level.**

## Commendations

1. The Board of Trustees is engaged and knowledgeable about the Cotting educational programs and at the same time exhibit respect for the role and expertise of the administration and staff.
2. The Board of Trustees has a strong sense of the strategic direction of the school and Board priorities are aligned.
3. Each year the Board, in a formal vote, at the annual meeting reviews and reaffirms the Mission of the School.
4. Board members are engaged in the program through various events and one hundred percent (100%) of the Trustees support the school with a donation annually.

## Recommendation 1

The Visiting Committee concurs with the school's recommendation: *Documents supporting the governance of Cotting School are made available to faculty and staff. In addition, the financial information and Strategic Plan should be shared with faculty and staff with increasing frequency.*

## Recommendation 2

The Visiting Committee concurs with the school's recommendation: *As all of the members of our Board of Trustees have very varied and interesting backgrounds, the committee proposed that it might be of interest to the Cotting community to present occasional biographical profiles of board members, perhaps through video clips, on our website or other media.*

# Standard 3: Enrollment

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## Standard

The admissions process assures that those students who enroll are appropriate, given the school's mission, and are likely to benefit from their experience at the school.

## Visiting Team's Assessment

**Standard Met (SM1, SM2):** The students' experience is supported.

**Standard Unmet (SU1, SU2):** The students' experience is compromised.

SM2. Standard Met: Evidences understanding, evolving implementation and planning for improvement.

## Narrative Summary

**Brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to this standard. Text copied from the school's *Self-Study Report* is in italics.**

*Individual admissions decisions are made based on two major factors: 1) Can our program meet the student's needs? 2) Is there an appropriate academic and social grouping within the current program?*

*Cotting School continues to recognize that a comprehensive admissions process is the key component to maintaining a student body that will benefit from the services and structure provided by the school. The admissions process at Cotting School uses a multi-disciplinary team approach to ensure that the school evaluates each candidate from many perspectives. The best interest of the student is at the forefront of the decision making process. While Cotting School is fully in compliance with regard to the Enrollment Standard, we continue to make improvements in specific aspects of our practices (e.g. database to track referrals, reasons for cases in which a student is not accepted, trends in student referrals, communication with families and districts). Overall, Cotting School makes appropriate decisions regarding admission for students who can most benefit from the services our program provides.*

## Observations

Through meetings with admissions staff, mental health providers, faculty and administrators, the Visiting Committee found the enrollment process to be well-organized and thoughtfully implemented. We observed admissions decisions that are based on identifying candidates who fall within the range of abilities and needs of students currently enrolled. The typical Cotting student, whose needs are currently very competently met by the resourceful, committed faculty, describe the characteristics of those students. Nonetheless, a clear set of criteria for student applicants who are sought does not exist, outside specific demographic, funding, and health requirements. Faculty are particularly adept at identifying broad student education needs and determining ways to meet those needs, accounting for the well-earned reputation of Cotting to serve students with significant disabilities. The program seems to reactively evolve in response to needs of students who can be enrolled rather than searching for students who meet specific criteria. Enrollment/admission criteria, in the form of a well-defined Cotting student profile, are not evident although needed to drive the recruitment search are essential as the school seeks to add students moving forward.

Exclusion of students exhibiting needs beyond those common among enrolled students and beyond the perceived scope of faculty and nursing capacity supports is Cotting practice as initially determined by the Director of Admissions who acts as initial gatekeeper, then further considered by the admissions committee judged to be within appropriate limits.

Removal of the age cap on continued enrollment of students requiring intensive services has created challenges for staff working with those students as this subset of students moves into those programs and raises questions about how to maintain the robust transition programs that depend on community participation and independent living methods of intervention.

In addition to strengthening the recruitment/enrollment process, there is capacity within the school to enroll more students, The question of tactics to use in filling those spaces is compounded by the school's stated desire to include students from diverse backgrounds who could benefit from Cotting's uniquely integrated services. Likewise, there are difficulties presented by state regulations that preclude awarding typical scholarship assistance in meeting that goal. The efforts of the Consulting program, after school and supportive services such as the Vision program are identified as opportunities to reach some of those students, especially those who are not as enrolled students.

Engagement with outside consultants around marketing specifically for recruitment provided Cotting with advice and recommendations advice for identifying ways to modify its existing marketing and admissions efforts. The re-focus recently completed with these consultants highlighted need to expand existing relationships and to create new approaches to recruit students who fit within the range of services Cotting offers. These include recommendations for purposeful messaging that is targeted within the range of stakeholders, specifically LEAs and parents. Continuing use of social media again with the targeted messaging that speaks to the specific services being sought will facilitate Cotting's connection to various audiences in order to achieve strategic and tactical goals of admissions.

Expansion and sustainability of student enrollment has the benefit of building on the extremely positive experiences of current and former students who thrive in the school's supportive environment. depends on clearly identifying qualities of students they are looking to admit, not yet in place. Marketing to target those students from passive vision of admission to active recruitment depends on this targeted approach.

*Based on the strength of existing relationships, Cotting is well-positioned to promote their program to new audiences. Consideration of existing relationships with the medical community connected to Cotting through the Medical Director from Boston Children's Hospital, the dentist and vision specialists who visit Cotting to provide direct student services, the strong connection to the Special Ed Directors who are liaisons to the sending LEA, the Consulting faculty who have relationships with additional LEAs where services are provided, and the Cotting parent and board networks can new opportunities to coordinate with Admissions in recruitment efforts. These initiatives require a movement away from the perception that resources are dedicated to the primary purpose of their connection rather than seeing that they could potentially also serve as conduit to advance the admissions effort. This means re-framing these relationships in the spirit of collaborative partnerships rather than as competition. Enabling Cotting to capitalize on existing relationships in ways that don't damage trust between Cotting and those resources, particularly LEAs, is a recommended path to enhance enrollment.*

## Commendations

1. The accuracy of enrollment decisions to admit students who benefit from the Cotting program is evident in the appropriateness and success of enrolled students despite the existence of a clear admissions criteria. Cotting is passionate about providing a nurturing environment that allows students to flourish and they know how to accommodate to those student student needs. The school exudes the can-do spirit resulting in a vibrant school program with faculty and staff who build on those qualities of students who enroll. The school's recognition that current dependence on a passive approach to enrollment isn't sustainable drives the current compelling pursuit of ways to overhaul its enrollment practices and is actively seeking the guidance it needs.



2. The range and depth of expertise among the admissions team as they consider candidates first vetted by Director of Admissions is a significant asset. Inclusion of the entire mental health support faculty, director of nursing, and appropriately matched teachers and specialists to meet the family and evaluate the student assures multiple perspectives necessary to judge likelihood of successful enrollment and shares responsibilities related to the admissions process with direct service staff. Faculty perceptions of appropriateness of admissions decisions will be strengthened as they continue to share observations and recommendations with the admissions team.
3. The requirement for a written funding assurance before the initiation of Admissions process establishes the conditions for consideration without giving false hope to families and students who aspire to a Cotting education but lack ability to pay.

## **Recommendation 1**

Develop a clear student profile of students whose needs for services match the programs offered at Cotting. Without this level of specificity, Cotting forfeits a significant level of control over the process of recruitment of those students who take best advantage of the coordinated, robust programs and creative, extremely capable faculty that deliver intensive and appropriate education to a particularly challenging portion of those students whose ability to learn is influenced by their physical, communication, and medical status. Re-direction of the admissions process from a passive position to one of actively pursuing those students who fit the profile is recommended. Related, Cotting should come to a conclusion about its students who require intensive services. If Cotting believes that they should serve this population, the Committee suggests that Cotting place a cap on the number of students who fit this profile and consider a separate admissions process and tuition rate to keep services to this cohort affordable.

## **Recommendation 2**

Coordinated with the more clearly defined Cotting student profile, consider engaging in a marketing consulting firm as a part of a larger review of strategic efforts identified the need for increasing targeted marketing activities and materials that reflect the range of services provided to students with varying educational, health and medical care needs. Matching materials and tactics to specific student needs and services available is strongly recommended.

## **Recommendation 3**

As such a critical component of the school's continued viability to serve students best suited to take advantage of the remarkable programs at Cotting, we recommend that the Admissions department be strengthened, with either additional staff or shifting of the mental health direct service expectations currently assigned to the Admissions Director. That would also serve to open the initial vetting of candidates to others who may have a different perspective on the screening information received, making it worthwhile to consider additional students for admission. The pending review of Marketing strategies should evaluate levels of appropriate staffing for the purpose of student enrollment that is commensurate with the importance of admissions to the school's overall and long-term health.

## **Recommendation 4**

Reframe the already strong relationships Cotting has with providers of medical, dental, and vision care, as well as with districts (especially LEAs) as a collaboration that benefits both entities. By promoting Cotting as an institution that can help and will partner with these organizations, Cotting may enhance and broaden its reputation and marketability in a way that increases the enrollment funnel of appropriate students. Currently there

is the perception that this will compromise a trust-relationship. Cotting should consider doing what it can to change this perception with its willingness to communicate and partner with these organizations.

## **Recommendation 5**

Investigate other funding models or supplementary programs or services that can add revenue at the same time providing services to eligible students (e.g., consider possibility to increase private pay enrollments, coordinate with other school components including the Consulting Services, ATAC, after-school programs open to non-enrolled students -- these are more likely after building expansion) Consider partnerships with other schools to work on Cotting's strong reputation for innovation and quality service delivery is recognized in the field where they are recognized as being experts in their fields. Drawing on that expertise, development of training materials, curriculum, assessment and evaluation tools (among other areas of strength) can be created for dissemination to others through collaborations, publications, presentations focused on services to students with significant disabilities.

# Standard 4: Program

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## Standard

The school provides a comprehensive program of intellectual, aesthetic, and physical activities that is appropriate to support the school's mission and core values, and is consistent with the needs of the range of students admitted. Program planning is informed by relevant research regarding how students learn and the knowledge and capacities they will need to lead purposeful and constructive lives.

## Visiting Team's Assessment

**Standard Met (SM1, SM2):** The students' experience is supported.

**Standard Unmet (SU1, SU2):** The students' experience is compromised.

SM1. Standard Met: Evidences clear understanding, effective implementation and thorough planning for further improvement.

## Narrative Summary

**Brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to this standard. Text copied from the school's *Self-Study Report* is in italics.**

*Cotting School has met this standard. Cotting School strives to create an inclusive community which fosters academic achievement, skill development and social-emotional maturity. We meet the unique needs of students with a broad spectrum of learning and communication disabilities, physical challenges and complex medical conditions by providing an array of integrated services. We value partnerships among students and families, staff, public funding agencies, donors, and volunteers. We provide outreach services, nationally and internationally, to expand our commitment and expertise in the field of special education. We design our day and residential training programs to enable students to realize their highest potential both during and after their enrollment.*

*Academic Achievement:*

*Cotting School serves students from ages 3 to 22 in a warm, nurturing, and therapeutic environment conducive to learning and social/emotional growth. All of our students benefit from individual and small group instruction, which enable a student to demonstrate what he or she does best and how he or she learns. Teachers, assistants and therapists work as a team to help each student reach his or her own goals. Students are exposed to a variety of academic subjects, including math, written language, reading, science, social studies and life/transitional skills. All of our teachers are talented, motivated, and wonderfully adept at teaching multiple grade and ability levels.*

*Our education program is divided into four levels varying by age: Pre-School/Lower School, Middle School, Upper School, and Capstone. Students in the Lower, Middle, and Upper School have a more academic focus for instruction. Students in the Capstone level are 18 years or older and have a more transitional focus of instruction.*

*Cotting School has designed an advanced, tiered system of support for literacy and math instruction. Language and literacy skills are taught throughout all levels of the program. Our balanced approach to literacy ensures that students of all ages are reading, writing, listening and working with words throughout their day. Additionally, a*

*daily academic intervention block and individual remedial services are available to support literacy and math skill development, as appropriate. A majority of students participate in this daily intervention block as part of their regular programming at Cotting. Teachers and therapists use a combination of literacy assessment data, classroom performance levels and expressive and receptive language scores to determine each student's area of need in literacy. Students are then assigned to a specific intervention program, focusing on individual priorities for either comprehension strategies or word identification skills.*

*In addition to the literacy intervention block, last year we implemented a math intervention block. Teachers and therapists use a combination of math assessment data, classroom performance levels and expressive and receptive language scores to determine each student's area of need in math. A majority of classrooms have implemented the Math U See Curriculum to aide with the instruction during math intervention time. Students are then assigned to a specific level of the intervention program that focuses on their individual priorities of need (e.g. number sense, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, geometry, algebra).*

#### *Skill Development:*

*Students visit other classrooms for age-appropriate enrichment activities such as the arts, adapted physical education, vocational programming and health. Each class gives students the opportunity to gain knowledge, develop their skills and interests, and offers each student unique ways to express themselves. State-of-the-art computer and assistive technology are readily available and integrated into the classroom and curriculum. The students also enjoy practicing their independence throughout our fully accessible building, outdoor playground, gymnasium, and playing fields.*

*We expect our students to reach the highest level of academic achievement and independence that all of their skills allow. Our community-based instruction is an opportunity for students in the Middle, Upper, and Capstone levels to visit a variety of settings in which to practice their skills. As students grow in their abilities, we give them more and more opportunities to apply their skills in real life settings such as community, work, and home. Our Project Bridges Program empowers students in the Upper School and Capstone to view themselves as a vital part of the greater community through volunteer work experiences. Students contribute to the productivity and morale of worksites while advocating for their individual needs and applying their skills in a professional setting.*

#### *Social-Emotional Maturity:*

*Student's social-emotional skills are developed in a number of ways both within the school-day curriculum and through enrichment experiences. Throughout the school day, students have access to integrated social skills curricula. Specific communication therapy and counseling sessions work on targeted social skills. These skills are also supported during incidental teaching opportunities within natural environments such as the cafeteria and greater community. Additionally, mental health services are available to students with the goal of reducing or removing barriers to learning.*

*In addition to social skills curricula built into the school day, the Supplemental Services Program enables students to explore new hobbies and forms of self-expression after formal school hours. These opportunities include the arts, social activities, communication, sports, and technology.*

*Extracurricular Sports are the most popular Supplemental Services programs with the majority of students participating in at least one activity each year. Options include soccer, golf, baseball, track and field, cheerleading, and basketball, providing social opportunities for students with varying interests and abilities. The basketball program includes nearly every Middle School, Upper School, and Capstone student in a seven-game season, culminating in a day-long tournament. The end of the season basketball banquet for players and their families recognizes the athletes for their efforts throughout the season. Each game is an opportunity to develop sportsmanship and friendship among teammates and rivals.*

*Cotting also sponsors annual activities and life experiences for students outside of school which promote social interaction. The prom, adapted ski trip, senior class trip to Disney World, and Best Buddies events create lifelong memories for students and mirror the experiences of their typically developing peers. These events promote social development through interaction with school and community. Each event provides multiple opportunities for social and emotional development.*

## *Integrated Services:*

*Medical, mental health, remedial tutoring, communication therapy, occupational therapy and physical therapy are specialty services that address specific areas of need that may hinder a student's ability to access the educational curriculum. These services are incorporated into the student's academic schedule and daily routine in a variety of settings as appropriate. Services may be provided during class, on community trips or during work experiences, lunch or in other settings where skills can be taught and practiced in a meaningful, functional setting. Other times, it may be necessary or more appropriate for learning to take place in a one to one setting. Sharing information with a student's team is a vital tool to enhance student learning, provide consistent teaching strategies, and ensure carryover of learned skills to a variety of settings. The foremost goal of all services is to provide input that will allow each student to participate and thrive in the academic environment, maximize functional independence, learn and generalize the skills necessary to lead purposeful and constructive lives.*

*Founded by two surgeons from Children's Hospital, Cotting School has always placed utmost priority on the highest quality of medical care. The medical team provides services that minimize the limiting effects of serious medical conditions allowing high risk, high need students access to the educational curriculum. Services provided to students include distributing medications, assisting students with personal care and self-catheterization, providing tube feedings, charting observations, consulting with parents and teachers, answering student questions, dispensing advice, concern, and praise. In the case of an emergency, the team provides a calm, efficient response and prompt referral to a hospital setting. The school is affiliated with Boston Children's Hospital and enjoys the regular visits of a staff pediatrician who provides consultation to the Medical Team, teachers, clinicians, and parents. Additionally, Cotting is affiliated with Tufts Dental School and the New England School of Optometry to provide other health maintenance specialties including dental and vision services.*

*The primary goal of providing mental health services at Cotting is to reduce or remove barriers to learning. To that end, a variety of issues are addressed including new student transitions to Cotting, disability awareness, social skill development, identification, regulation and management of emotions, decision making, and problem solving. Our goal is to provide Cotting students with learning opportunities so that they develop the skills that they need to be as confident and independent as possible.*

*Communication therapists (also known as Speech-Language Pathologists) work to ensure that students gain the skills necessary to be the most effective communicator they can be, that students have access to appropriate supports or equipment as needed, and that skills are generalized throughout school and community settings. Intervention is provided in the areas of receptive and expressive language, social skills, problem solving and reasoning, and augmentative communication. Therapeutic services are provided in the classroom, during community and vocational experiences, and in individual, small or large group settings.*

*Occupational therapy services are provided in the school setting through the IEP process to optimize access to the academic curriculum. It is available to students who have orthopedic, medical or neurological challenges that affect their ability to independently participate in educational activities throughout the school day. Occupational therapists work with students in the setting that best fits their individual needs. This includes within the OT/PT Department, in classrooms or the lunch room, etc. Services are integrated in the curriculum and classroom to ensure that activities are meaningful, encourage carryover, and center on the skills that will best support success in the school environment.*

*Physical therapy is another specialty service at Cotting School and is available to students who have orthopedic, medical or neurological problems affecting their performance in the educational environment. Physical therapy primarily addresses motor skill performance related to function and independent mobility. Adjunct programs such as positioning in standers or adaptive chairs, mobility training, and brace/orthotic use and management may supplement direct therapy services. Physical therapists train program assistants and teachers in the use of*

*adaptive equipment, seating and positioning, safe lifting and transfer techniques, and brace management. Physical therapists collaborate with ATP (Adaptive Technology Practitioners), equipment vendors and orthotists to assist in managing the wheelchair, mobility, positioning, bracing and orthotic needs of our students during routine on-site clinics. Physical therapists provide consultation to parents and Cotting staff regarding students'*

*physical and functional motor abilities and maintain ongoing communication with specialists outside of Cotting School.*

## **Observations**

The Visiting Committee recognizes the exemplary work of Cotting School in meeting the spirit and the letter of this standard. The standard itself--"*The school provides a comprehensive program of intellectual, aesthetic, and physical activities that is appropriate to support the school's mission and core values, and is consistent with the needs of the range of students admitted*"--defines what Cotting School does so well. The Visiting Committee sees how comprehensively Cotting attends to the needs of its students. As one faculty member said as she moved her class to their first period of the day, "Teamwork makes the dream work." The comprehensive program of adults working closely and collaboratively (teamwork) results in happy kids who are having their intellectual, aesthetic, and physical needs met (dream work).

The Visiting Committee found that many aspects of the program described in the self study -- academic achievement, skill development, social-emotional maturity, and integrated services (medical, mental health, remedial tutoring, communication therapy, occupational therapy and physical therapy) -- function in a sophisticated, thoughtful, effective, and comprehensive manner. However, there are opportunities to improve systematic communication and data tracking models across and between many aspects of the school that might improve the already very strong program. The Visiting Committee finds that the more granular perspective of the specific indicators helps to illuminate some areas that offer opportunities for improvement and will comment on them individually here for that reason. Cotting's responses are italicized.

***Standard 4a. Professional development time is used for faculty to research, study, and discuss issues of teaching and learning and the capacities students will need to develop.***

*Weekly professional development time and interdisciplinary collaboration time are used effectively for curriculum development and researching best practices.*

Wednesday meetings and the Summer Curriculum Institute are viewed by faculty interviewed as invaluable to addressing the needs of Cotting students and the program overall in a thoughtful and forward-thinking manner. There was a question from some faculty members about the access to funds for professional development and advanced degrees. In terms of funds for professional development, not all teaching faculty knew of that resource; in terms of advanced degrees faculty interviewed were unclear about what the policy was.

Indicator 4a is a real strength of program; however, there are some questions of unintentional lack of transparency that could be addressed.

***Standard 4b. The school's program demonstrates consideration for the appropriate intellectual, social, physical, aesthetic, emotional, and ethical development of students in all aspects of school and student life.***

*We support all aspects of school and student life through Individualized Education Programs and specialized staffing to support. This includes after school activities and social opportunities.*

The Committee agrees, almost completely, with the school's assessment. The social, physical, aesthetic, intellectual, ethical aspects of student life are deliberately attended to in a way that resonates with all students and families. Though the Committee does NOT feel that the emotional needs of students are unattended, there are some questions that came up about how emotional and attendant behavior are proactively and comprehensively considered. The question that arose was if the school was serving the emotional needs of students in a reactive or a proactive manner.

***Standard 4c. The curriculum demonstrates continuity from year to year.***

*This is constantly evolving and changing as we strive to provide continuity through curriculum development,*

*program review and classroom groupings.*

The Committee sees this as an area that could receive attention. Though we firmly believe that from year to year the needs of a student are addressed in terms of groupings, we wonder about the mechanisms the school has in place for documented curricular and skill continuity from year to year in ways that are formal. Currently, this only happens in the areas of literacy and math intervention. The need for continuity applies to academics, skills, functional, and integrated therapies. The Visiting Committee believes that there is a strong opportunity for growth here. While Cotting faces significant challenges in monitoring student progress through its divisions because of its unique population, the Committee nevertheless feels that progress through curriculum requires a robust and transparent monitoring system.

**Standard 4d. The school has a policy for regularly reviewing the academic program and has completed a recent, written curriculum plan outlining desirable and/or necessary improvements.**

*Our curriculum is reviewed through Curriculum Work Groups, the Summer Curriculum Institute and the Instructional Leadership Team. Each group follows procedures to outline desirable and/or necessary improvements and implement recommended changes.*

This is the other main indicator that the Visiting Committee believes should be addressed in the Program standard. The Committee's visits to the classroom show careful attention to a student-centered curriculum; the school follows Massachusetts state curriculum standards; and there are weekly meetings and summer curriculum-development time. Despite these observations, there does appear to be a lack of regular, systematic, and transparent review of program or a documented curriculum plan spanning all aspects of a Cotting education.

**Standard 4e. Attention is paid to transitions between grade levels and/or divisions of the school so as to facilitate passage of students from one level/division to another.**

*Recent updates to program levels ensure students are optimally placed in appropriate groups. Ongoing discussion regarding staff changes and/or peer groupings result in cohesive transitions.*

The Committee agrees that there is an optimal placement in appropriate groups for Cotting students. The end-of-year division level meetings that group students for the upcoming year are thoughtful and collaborative. In particular, having the division teachers leading the discussion about student groupings would indicate positive outcomes for students. Because of the small size and single building, there is not necessarily a dramatic difference in student experiences as they move from division to division. However there does seem to be an appropriate level of differentiation as students progress through Cotting. The team pays close attention to increasing work opportunities for students from middle school through Capstone which culminates in regular workplace placements and the possibility for community college courses.

**Standard 4f. The program offers a variety of cultural experiences to reflect (a) the diversity of students enrolled and (b) the multicultural nature of the region, country, and world.**

*Every effort is made to offer a variety of cultural experiences. There is no discrimination. While the student population is relatively racially homogeneous, we are very diverse in terms of level of disability, academic ability and geographic origin.*

The Committee did not get a solid understanding of why the school is emphasizing diversity in its self-study. Is it because of a belief in the need for diversity generally, a push from the process of the self-study itself, the good of the community, the opportunity for improved academic outcomes, a richer more authentic student experience, a question of equity, or something else? Diversity came up frequently in the self-study and rarely in our conversations with faculty, staff, students, administrators, parents, or board members. It should be noted that it DID come up, but not with the frequency or intensity with which other topics came up organically, or that would be indicated by its presence in the self-study.

There are more observations to follow below in the discussion of diversity out of part 2.

**Standard 4g. The school recognizes developmental levels of children and take them into consideration in planning the program and teaching methodologies.**

All areas of the program are dictated by and adapted to individual student needs.

Indeed. The Visiting Committee agrees.

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There was an item brought up in the Aspects Warranting Attention of the Program Standard the Committee will also address here.

*Being more competitive with staff salaries as compared to other schools, such as a salary schedule.*

The Committee recognizes that specialized schools will not be able to match the public school salary. That said, the Committee believes that a lack of competitive salaries can be a vulnerability for the school and suggests the school continue to monitor and strive to offer salaries that are competitive. Cotting has strengths (community, professional environment, love of job, passion for making a difference) that offset a smaller salary and keep faculty at Cotting, but salaries should nevertheless be monitored. More significant, however, is the sense of a lack of transparency that some faculty feel. Faculty do not seem to have an idea if they are being paid equitably in comparison to their peers at Cotting. In our opinion, this is a greater risk to morale that salary vulnerability in comparison to public schools.

Additionally, there was the following recommendation in the self-study Program standard:

*Trainings related to behavioral supports and/or staffing (i.e. BCBA (Board Certified Behavior Analyst) on staff) would support the program.*

The Committee believes that Cotting should consider the makeup of the staff responsible for responding to the social-emotional and behavioral needs of the students. It is clear that Zones of Regulation and social thinking curricula make a positive impact on the functioning of the community. However, we noticed that non-routine behaviors impact the staff and program. (i.e., behaviors that require a student to be removed from class or an adult outside of the classroom to come into the classroom after being called on the radio). This is not just a factor of time spent. It should be considered whether someone clinically trained to manage, diagnose, track, and design interventions to challenging behavior is needed in the makeup of the Cotting faculty/staff. There may be a need for an additional role to support the program's ability to deal with difficult behavior in a way that does not take away from other aspects of the program. For example, the current system of having the head of admissions on call for behavior challenges does not seem the best allocation of resources. Additionally, the Committee believes that the school should consider investing in more training around dealing with unexpected behavior in the classrooms for all faculty and staff so that the program itself is not disrupted.

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In Part II of the self-study, the school highlighted two things that impact program broadly that the Committee should mention here in this programming standard: diversity and programming for your most complex students. This program standard will not quote the entire section of Part II here, only the introductions.

In terms of the most complex students, Part II reads:

*In particular, we are interested in curriculum and instructional practices that are appropriate for the most complex students, and that will improve outcomes and levels of self-determination and communicative competence. None of the five classroom teachers that currently work with these students were on the Program self-study committee, and so this was not an area that was specifically identified during the initial phase of the self-study process. However, there was consensus in later discussions that this is an important issue to be addressed in the next five years, and so, it was added as a Major Theme of the self-study.*

The Visiting Committee believes that this is indeed a programming area that requires attention. There is no question that these students are being well served at Cotting School, and there is no question that the current program is being adapted as best is possible to meet the more intensive needs of this group. However, the



decision to remove the age-out limitation for the intensive program cohort, along with the removal of the separate program status for this group, has created for the school some unintended consequences that are significant enough that the committee believes this decision could be reconsidered.

Having 20 or more students in a school of 114 that have significantly different needs makes the overall program vulnerable in different ways. There is an identity issue of “whom do we serve” that might come up in admissions or marketing that could affect enrollment. There is also the question of expense and resources. If, on average, the intensive-needs population requires a 4-student classroom with 2 aides when the other classrooms have 8 students to a room, and if the intensive-needs students require more services, the question of cost must be addressed. If this population continues to expand, or even stays at its current level, does the model remain affordable? The Committee does not say one way or another if the school should service this population. We do, however, encourage the school to investigate if consideration of impact on admissions, cost-effectiveness, and response to intervention makes a case for rethinking how the intensive-needs population fits into the overall school community.

In terms of diversity, Part II reads, in part:

*Diversity is a topic that is ingrained in our work at Cotting, and is a current evolving focus at all times. There are many aspects of diversity to consider at Cotting School. Specifically, who makes up our student population, our faculty and staff, and the diversity aspects of curriculum that students experience at Cotting should all be considered. While there are varying levels of control, or lack of control that we may have over each of these aspects, they all warrant further consideration and planning.*

Part II then continues to comment on diversity at Cotting in the following areas: student body, faculty, and curriculum.

The Committee suggests that the issue of diversity in any environment is not adequately addressed by acknowledging the diversity of ability. If diversity is indeed an area that Cotting feels it needs to address, as indicated in the self-study, Cotting might consider investing more training, education, and resources to a comprehensive look at questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion institution-wide.

Diversity of the student body and faculty are issues that will be taken up in other standards as they pertain to hiring practices, marketing, financial aid, access to Cotting, and human resources. However, the Committee asks Cotting to consider diversity not as a separate initiative, but as a way to think about Cotting holistically. The Cotting School -- in mission and in practice -- lives and breathes the best of thinking about diversity. In fact, Cotting only exists because of diverse needs. All members of the Cotting community have experienced or witnessed the relief, joy, and sense of safety experienced by students who have been previously excluded because of difference. The corollary to this is that every student of Cotting who does not see themselves represented at the table, so to speak, whether because of race, gender, socio-economic status, or sexual orientation still feels part of themselves excluded at the very place they are meant to feel most included.

The Committee notes that there are some faculty members who are deeply invested in this work and who are seeking the support and approval of the administration. Additionally, there are a number of faculty and staff (34) who self-selected to take part in a book club to discuss race and the difficulty in addressing it. (This was supported by the administration by the purchase of the books.) It appears there is support from faculty and staff for increased training and discussion on this topic as well as some faculty who would be willing to lead the work (or who are already leading). At the level of program, we suggest that time, training, and attention be given to sending interested faculty and staff members to appropriate training so that the school supports the curricular, information gathering, and community building diversity work that has already been begun by community members.

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Some final observations:

1. The Committee notes that there are some departments that do not feel as programmatically integrated, supported, or visible, specifically in the arts. These disciplines can often feel silo-ed in a community that is

otherwise remarkably communicative and collaborative.

2. The Committee received feedback from parents, teachers, and administrators about the need for opportunities beyond students' 22nd year and suggestions about the expansion of the 18-22 program and HOPEHouse. We believe that some thought should be given to considering both of these. Is there is an opportunity to provide services to students post-Cotting or to link and partner with appropriate adult service organizations? Or is there an opportunity to promote and expand the HOPEhouse model?

## **Commendations**

1. The Committee was struck by the quality of services provided to the students in an exemplary fashion program-wide. Multiple members of the Visiting Committee were emotionally moved by the teaching moments they observed in a classroom. The expert programming provided to the students is targeted and differentiated in a manner that would be hard to believe if we had not witnessed it. When any student enters a classroom, they are met with expert, caring adults who tailor a lesson to their immediate physical, intellectual, emotional, and academic needs. Overall, the Visiting Committee commends the faculty and staff for their unshakable belief in the abilities and potential of every student.
2. The Committee finds Cotting to be the gold standard of an integrated service model. Each aspect of a student's need is attended to, often while in the classroom environment. The number of moving parts that must be juggled on a daily basis are daunting; nevertheless, the student's team provides what the student needs calmly, professionally, and comprehensively. This is a marvel. Well done, Cotting!
3. The Committee would also commend Cotting for its willingness and ability to change their program to meet the needs of the diverse population with shifting needs. The embrace of different abilities and the acknowledgment that these differences change over time beautifully illustrates the Cotting School's commitment and care of its students.

## **Recommendation 1**

The Committee believes that the definition, collection, dissemination, and utilization of data is an area that needs attention at Cotting. We believe that the program itself delivers differentiated instruction beautifully to its students. The area of growth here would come from the collection of data to inform instruction and track student progress.

## **Recommendation 2**

The Committee finds that the Intensive Program should be thoroughly investigated by Cotting. One question that warrants serious consideration is whether or not to provide a separate application, tuition, and program for these students. Managing the enrollment of students in the Intensive Program in this manner would allow Cotting to select the correct number of students to have in this cohort. Since programming for these students is already more resource-intensive, receiving increased tuition dollars would help cover the costs the school is already spending.

## **Recommendation 3**

The Committee believes the school should determine what its policy and standards should be in terms of being a diverse institution. If Cotting School comes to the conclusion that diversity means more than diverse ability levels -- which is the belief of the Committee -- then we recommend that Cotting engages in serious and systematic engagement with their program in this regard. The Committee recognizes that there is already support among a number of faculty and staff. Even though successful initiatives of diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools require board-level and senior administrative support (along with a strong financial commitment), at the level of program the Committee recommends that the school support the initiatives already in place (book discussion groups, communication, and a sharing of resources) and publicly support the faculty who are already

doing this work to bring this initiative into the program itself.

# Standard 5: Experience of the Students

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## Standard

The school actively considers individual students and has developed plans, policies, programs, and pedagogy to nurture, support, and encourage all students to reach their potential and to participate in the life of the school.

## Visiting Team's Assessment

**Standard Met (SM1, SM2):** The students' experience is supported.

**Standard Unmet (SU1, SU2):** The students' experience is compromised.

SM1. Standard Met: Evidences clear understanding, effective implementation and thorough planning for further improvement.

## Narrative Summary

**Brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to this standard. Text copied from the school's *Self-Study Report* is in italics.**

*Cotting School actively considers individual students and has created multiple layers of support to ensure that all students can derive benefit from our programming. Cotting School provides multidisciplinary supports with integration of physical therapy, occupational therapy, communication therapy, nursing, counseling, and remedial services. These integrated services allow students to maximize their performance and level of functional independence in the educational environment through the development of social skills, and gross and fine motor skills and/or application of adaptive equipment (e.g. manual or power wheelchair, walking aids, writing/eating utensils, etc.).*

*As an educational facility for students with learning/communication disabilities, physical challenges and complex medical conditions, the Cotting medical and mental health department is committed to the good health of all its students so they are able to receive the full benefits of its educational program. The departments actively consider individual students and helps to nurture, support and encourage each and every student to reach their highest potential. We provide an inclusive and accepting environment that provides individualized support to help foster independence, confidence and participation in the life of the school. We recognize the importance of the active collaboration of the students, staff, families, community resources and health care providers to optimize the level of health and independence of students.*

*Part of the experience of the student relates to extracurricular activities that are offered throughout the school day as well as outside school hours. These activities include, but are not limited to athletics, physical fitness, performing arts, industrial arts, sensory art and music. These extracurricular activities have authentic experiences embedded, such as social experiences, age-appropriate activities and activities supported by peers and staff rather than parents. All of these experiences help promote independence, advocacy skills and self-determination skills. Activities are an extension of the classroom, as they help reinforce skills learned in the classroom and therapeutic settings and apply those skills in realistic environments. All activities are designed to be as available as possible for all students regardless of age and ability.*

*As students develop their skills and advance in age, students are provided experiences in the community as well as opportunities to participate in a work program. Community exposure begins in Middle School and continues through age 22. The on-campus work program begins in Upper School and may continue through age 22, as appropriate. The off-campus work program begins around age 16. As a student reaches age 22, his or her time off-campus may increase to multiple times a week in addition to going into the community. Students are provided a job coach with the goal that eventually the job coach will be faded out. Students have opportunities to try a variety of work-related tasks in efforts to help students identify the types of work they are most interested in. This is a large part of the transition process. Our hope is that our students, upon graduation from Cotting, are able to identify work preferences, create a resume and have a job history.*

## **Observations**

From our first moments on campus, the Visiting Committee was filled with awe and admiration for the positive spirit and outlook each student and adult mentor brought to the community. As each student arrived to begin the school day, it became clear that Cotting was a place they loved, were excited to be and eager for the day ahead. The Visiting Committee noticed that each adult mentor was genuinely interacting with the students and through word and action made it clear that the students belong at Cotting and they are grateful to be in their presence.

Each student brings with them a unique journey that has led them to the doors of Cotting School. Each difference is recognized by the adult mentors and team at Cotting, with each member of the community actively responding to positive and/or negative experiences as they arise. As the adult mentors navigate these various situations, it is apparent that they do take time to engage with each other and discuss the students whenever possible. That said, it is noted that the primary modes of communication appear to be e-mail and/or informal conversations that may not necessarily align with the timing of regularly scheduled meetings and do not fall into a unified communication system.

It was unclear to the Visiting Committee what process is used to guide the teachers in independent self-reflection with sessions and lessons. The administration seem eager to support teachers and make themselves available to meet with teachers on an as needed basis.

In an added effort to support the faculty, Cotting offers several in-service meetings and multi-disciplinary committees and curriculum groups. While these are excellent resources, the Visiting Committee questioned whether or not there should be more scheduled opportunities to discuss specific students and strategies to support these students in an effort to make their overall experience at Cotting even more successful.

The Admissions team and Mental Health team are in place to support the students. The Visiting Committee was very impressed with the Mental Health team's heartfelt desire to meet the needs of the students. Given the various duties each member of the team has at Cotting, it was noted that members of the Mental Health team feel as though they are working at maximum capacity with the "on call" duties adding an extra responsibility that becomes quite difficult to manage on a day to day basis. The Visiting Committee feels additional support for the members of the Mental Health team would provide them the opportunity to fulfill their duties better, thus enhancing each students daily experience at Cotting.

An area where the Mental Health team has improved the student experience is through the various curriculum efforts that they have provided for the faculty. One program that has proven success is the Zones of Regulation. The Visiting Committee does encourage the Mental Health team to find regularly scheduled times to review such curriculum with the adult mentors to provide feedback throughout the year, rather than just at the start of each school year. This would also allow for another platform to discuss the needs of the students. The Mental Health team should also consider seeking more opportunities to empower students in the Capstone program to integrate these skill sets into various situations where other parties may not have the same vocabulary they are accustomed to using at Cotting. The Visiting Committee also feels it would be useful to offer more support with student behavior strategies and implementing Student Behavior Plans with the faculty.

Cotting has a solid foundation for the arts. Moving forward, it may be productive to explore more opportunities to integrate the arts within the school community. Currently, due to other uses of the theatre space, it appears to be challenging to have consistent access to the space on an impromptu, as needed basis. The performing arts may prove to be a very resourceful space for students to explore and practice several techniques and skills they are

learning on a day to day basis. Similarly, students are often pulled from the arts specials for OT/PT/CT, thus missing another chance to take advantage of the holistic opportunity for growth that can be possible through the arts.

While the voices of the faculty and parents permeate throughout discussions of the school, the student voice appears to be lacking. The Visiting Committee was struck by the ability of the students at Cotting, especially students who have spent several years in the program. It would enhance the student experience if there were more opportunities for them to engage from a leadership perspective, empowered to own their school culture.

The Visiting Committee was thrilled to see the robust off-campus opportunities that are offered for the students. Contrary to the self-study noting this as an area of weakness, the Visiting Committee observed this as a strength. Student feedback makes it clear they are grateful for these opportunities and the scaffolding of the various adventures provides chances for the students to use the skills they are learning at Cotting, while also creating a memorable high school experience.

The Visiting Committee did notice an opportunity to address diversity within the school community. Given the open nature of the adult mentors, experienced leadership team, and nurturing environment, the foundation is laid to have conversations about varying areas of difference and diversity from race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and so much more.

## **Conclusions and Explanation of Rating**

The student experience is always influenced by that of the adult mentors. The Visiting Committee is impressed with the dedication and determination of the adult mentors at Cotting School. We encourage the administrative team to work on streamlining communication systems, re-evaluating the meeting schedule, and exploring areas in which faculty support can improve in order to better serve the students at Cotting.

Overall, it is quite clear the students at Cotting are having a positive experience. As noted by one of the students, "they treat us like regular students here." The Visiting Team does not take for granted the incredible work Cotting is doing by taking students who have often felt hurt, misunderstood, or ignored in various school settings and providing them with a safe place to learn about themselves, the world they live in, and how to navigate that world with tools and resources available to them. It is the dedication of each adult serving on the team at Cotting that makes the student experience so remarkable.

Perhaps the best way to sum up the student experience in Cotting lies in one of the students answers from a recent survey, "Cotting employees, if you're reading this, thank you for actually helping me learn and treating me like a human being."

## **Commendations**

1. Cotting School is doing a commendable job of serving the individual needs of each student and consistently striving to innovate to meet those needs to the best of their ability. Cotting School is approaching each student with a holistic view for their education. The team takes into consideration the physical, cognitive, medical, and social-emotional needs of each student. The team is well-equipped to meet the students needs on a day to day basis and during moments of trauma or tragedy.
2. Cotting School remains open to feedback to improve the student experience. From the administrative team to support staff, each team member appears to desire conversation to improve and make Cotting the best it can be for the students.
3. Cotting School effectively provides their students with several off-campus opportunities to utilize and improve the skills they are learning. The team is going above and beyond to give each student as many chances as possible to take part in various programs. When a student is struggling with going on an off-campus trip, the team meets them where they are and supports them to build up the confidence to attend.

## **Recommendation 1**

The Visiting Committee strongly encourages Cotting School to find methods of empowering students and offering opportunities for leadership within the school community. Perhaps the students can be involved in planning events such as prom, or utilize some of the older students to mentor or play games with younger students. Perhaps the students can work with the arts faculty to plan guest performances and/or programs. Perhaps creating a platform for students to voice concerns and opinions on a consistent basis.

## **Recommendation 2**

The Visiting Committee suggests that Cotting School work to implement a system of tracking student feedback and experience with concrete data that can be archived and used for professional development and admissions purposes. Moving forward, it might be useful for the school community to ask itself some crucial questions. How do we track student feedback? What opportunities do we provide to empower the students at Cotting? How involved are the older students with younger students? What lessons can we learn from HOPEhouse that would impact the overall trajectory of how we inspire our students to self-advocate? Is there a way to archive student feedback through various multimedia platforms that would provide information for the community and prospective students?

## **Recommendation 3**

The Visiting Committee suggests that Cotting School explore different times and methods of conducting personnel meetings to provide the most opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations about each student. Would it be useful to move towards an advising or case assignment system to aid in facilitating a streamlined process?

## **Recommendation 4**

The Visiting Committee was impressed with every adult mentor's strong desire to see each student have success when they leave Cotting. The Visiting Committee encourages an in depth analysis of the current transition program. Is the process starting early enough? Is the student voice heard throughout the process? Are alumni data and stories taken into account to discover what methods proved successful and those that did not? When a family looks back on Cotting, how does the transition process impact the student's overall experience at Cotting?

## **Recommendation 5**

The Visiting Committee encourages Cotting School engage in strategic thinking about how to diversify all aspects of the school community. As the school processes how to address these issues, the Visiting Committee encourages Cotting to be daring and bold as you have been in other areas of programming. A focus on addressing different topics with different age groups at Cotting may be an ideal approach. Before you delve into diversity as a school community, we encourage you to delve into a discussion with your team. What is diversity? What does it mean to you? How has your experience at Cotting been? As you delve into these discussions, we encourage you to avoid cliché actions of depending upon the minority voice but seek the voice of all members within the community.

# Standard 6: Resources to Support the Program

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## Standard

Given the school's mission, there are adequate resources (space, equipment, technology, materials, and community) to support the school's program.

## Visiting Team's Assessment

**Standard Met (SM1, SM2):** The students' experience is supported.

**Standard Unmet (SU1, SU2):** The students' experience is compromised.

SM1. Standard Met: Evidences clear understanding, effective implementation and thorough planning for further improvement.

## Narrative Summary

**Brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to this standard. Text copied from the school's *Self-Study Report* is in italics.**

*In keeping with Cotting School's mission, our services and resources continue to evolve to provide the very best education for those students with disabilities who are not adequately served by traditional in-district programs. Our facility is fully equipped and accessible. The spacious, thoughtful design allows students to move freely throughout the building and grounds to safely participate in all aspects of their school day as independently as possible. Technology is an integral part of the program for both students and staff. Technology is consistently and seamlessly integrated across all program areas, and both hardware and software tools are monitored and evaluated for school, classroom and student use. Similarly, teachers have access to any classroom materials necessary and larger scale curriculum materials are developed, piloted and implemented to support students across all levels. Perhaps Cotting's strongest resource is the sense of community that permeates the building. Students, parents and faculty share a feeling of belonging that greatly contributes to the culture and atmosphere for learning and growth.*

## Observations

The Visiting Committee made observations similar to that of the self-study committee. There are a multitude of resources to support the program and overall mission of the school.

The Visiting Committee observed all areas of the facility to be highly organized, well maintained, adequately lit, and equipped with all necessary supplies to support students and staff. The facilities are very well designed and maintained to support the mission and student's needs. The Visiting Committee observed this to be true of instructional areas, therapy areas, recreational areas and common areas. The facility promotes independence amongst students. A capital campaign is well underway to thoughtfully and strategically enhance the existing facilities. Instructional materials were observed throughout the school, were organized, and were readily available.

General educational and assistive technology was integrated throughout the school environment seamlessly and staff were observed to be very comfortable and well versed in effectively using technology in support of instruction and therapy goals. While the Visiting Committee found that teachers are surveyed each year, the information is not necessarily shared to executive management intentionally to formulate a long-term technology



plan and drive budgetary decisions and allocations.

The Visiting Committee observed a variety of non-academic, extended day, and extended school year extra-curricular activities. Students were actively engaged in these activities and these activities appeared to be designed as value-added elements to the program. The Visiting Committee observed scheduling to support the needs of individual students and the school as a whole. All student and class schedules were clearly posted and well-known to staff and students. Staff were observed transitioning students to and from various academic and therapy appointments throughout the day.

There is abundant evidence that Cotting School has strong partnerships within the community, both as a good neighbor, but also to develop strong and strategic programmatic partnerships. Several students complete programming in the community on a daily basis.

The Visiting Committee found that Cotting School believes it has limited options for financial aid and scholarship due to lack of clarity with regard to regulatory and statutory parameters in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Endowment revenue is used to strategically cover operating expenses. The Visiting Committee found that The Cotting School does not offer online courses at this time.

## **Commendations**

**The Visiting Committee commends The Cotting School for:**

- 1. Maintaining a facility that is intentionally designed to effectively meet the needs of Cotting students.**
2. Compiling robust instructional materials that are organized, contemporary, and easily accessible.
3. Achieving strong integration of instructional and assistive technology throughout the program.
4. Developing a network of collaborative and engaged stakeholders including parents, families, and trustees and strong network of community partners that support programming.
5. Building and maintaining a fleet of reliable and safe vehicles to accommodate and support student programming in the community.

## **Recommendation 1**

The Visiting Committee recommends that Cotting School develop and maintain a multi-year technology plan, aligned with the strategic plan and integrated into the annual budget, that plans for maintenance of existing infrastructure and expansion of educational and assistive technology. Bringing these departments under common leadership may assist this process.

## **Recommendation 2**

The Visiting Committee recommends that Cotting School develop and maintain a multi-year capital plan, aligned with the strategic plan and integrated into the annual budget, that plans for maintenance of existing infrastructure and expansion/enhancement of facilities.

## **Recommendation 3**

The Visiting Committee recommends that Cotting School evaluate new opportunities for community outreach efforts to expand programmatic offerings and increase brand awareness.

## **Recommendation 4**

The Visiting Committee recommends Cotting School consider options for a Student Information System (SIS) for scheduling, reporting, data tracking, and parent portal.

# Standard 8: Residential Program and/or Homestay Program

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## Standard

The Residential Program and/or Homestay Program provide for an intentional curriculum, appropriate facilities, engaging activities, and adequate supervision to meet the needs of each student.

## Visiting Team's Assessment

**Standard Met (SM1, SM2): The students' experience is supported.**

**Standard Unmet (SU1, SU2): The students' experience is compromised.**

SM1. Standard Met: Evidences clear understanding, effective implementation and thorough planning for further improvement.

## Narrative Summary

**Brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to this standard. Text copied from the school's *Self-Study Report* is in italics.**

*HOPEhouse at Cotting School is a 5-day per week, (180 school days) boarding, educational and transition program designed to serve young adults ages 17-22 who have physical/medical disabilities, communication disabilities, and other challenges to learning. The HOPEhouse residence is located on the Cotting School campus and has 8 living units with fully accessible bathrooms, a recreation room, open concept living room, accessible kitchen, dining area and laundry area. Students also have access to the Cotting School Building and grounds as well as activities sponsored by Cotting Day Program during the school day and after school supplemental activities. Students benefit from structured programming designed to teach life, social and vocational skills with increasing independence in program and community settings. Specialized academic instruction is focused on functional and applied skills designed to meet each students' individualized needs.*

*HOPEhouse follows a structured transition curriculum based on the Life Centered Education (LCE) curriculum that includes daily living, employment and self-determination skills. Teachers and staff members help students to prepare for transition to adulthood. Students are provided with opportunities to learn skills in real life settings fostered by activities that include: personal care; medication and health, fitness, nutrition; emotional well-being; social engagement. Students learn while living in a group setting with others who have similar needs. Teachers teach a wide variety of independent living skills based on the student's personal goals (in the areas of post-secondary education, employment and adult living/community living), interests and challenges, with time allotted for skill development and mastery. Students are expected to transfer skills to their home/community on weekends and during school/holiday breaks. Targeted goals are included in each student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) with achievements assessed through ongoing data collection and documented in quarterly progress reports.*

*HOPEhouse staff are hired because of their unique qualifications and experiences. They receive extensive orientation and ongoing training and supervision to provide adequate supervision to meet the needs of each student.*

## Observations

HOPEhouse is the understated gem of Cotting School. Within the first moments of walking into HOPEhouse it becomes apparent this is a unique building that is achieving quality and meaningful work.

When one reflects on the mission of Cotting School, HOPEhouse appears to be the culmination of what Cotting hopes to achieve with each student. Every member of the house is being guided towards independence and given the chance to feel empowered and valued for their voice and opinions.

The Visiting Committee took note of the very impressive leadership team within HOPEhouse. The team undergoes meticulous training and detailed records are kept about all trainings and programs that take place in HOPEhouse. There is a skilled balance of providing scaffolding for the students while simultaneously allowing them an opportunity to feel as though they have full ownership over the home they live in.

The Visiting Committee feels the detailed admissions process is what contributes to the success of the program at HOPEhouse. Similarly, the structure of consistent team meetings allows for continued self-reflection and growth within the program. After visiting HOPEhouse, it quickly became apparent that the leadership team has taken steps to implement changes to address all of the areas of weaknesses/needs noted in the self-study.

The Visiting Committee did observe that all of the students currently residing in HOPEhouse were once Cotting students. We would encourage HOPEhouse to explore all options for potential students within the admissions process, including students who have not attended Cotting. The Visiting Committee did get a sense that the members of the HOPEhouse team desire to see a sense of more self-advocacy in students coming to HOPEhouse from Cotting, which speaks to an opportunity to empower the students more during their time in Capstone.

The Visiting Committee was filled with awe as we observed a house meeting where each student was actively engaged and sharing a level of vulnerability that was authentic, tender, and inspiring. This speaks to the unique work taking place in HOPEhouse. However, it seems to be that some members of the team at Cotting are unaware of what takes place as they have often approached HOPEhouse team members saying, "aren't you bored over there?" This speaks to an opportunity to bridge the gap of communication between Cotting School and HOPEhouse. The faculty and staff survey also spoke to this issue with relaying information between the two programs.

The Visiting Team left the time at HOPEhouse feeling impressed and inspired. We hope to see Cotting continue to enhance and develop this vital force within their community.

## Conclusions and Explanation of Rating

HOPEhouse is a powerful and emerging example of how to provide a solid residential program to a unique student population. While there are only seven students that reside in HOPEhouse, the Visiting Committee encourages Cotting School to have the team explore how the vision and/or goals of attending a program such as HOPEhouse for a first year student can impact their career at Cotting.

The HOPEhouse team is dedicated to continually self-reflecting and revamping the program to meet the needs of the students. Policies and procedures are being evaluated throughout the year and there is even a chance for students to have a voice about the student handbook and the guidelines laid out within the program.

Given the detailed records and information tracked by the leadership team, HOPEhouse is able to consistently examine where they have come from and where they are going. The atmosphere of the house exudes a sense of safety, security, openness, and relaxation. It provides the ideal balance of work, fun, and home.

Overall, HOPEhouse is a gem of Cotting School and the Visiting Committee hopes the school will continue to develop and enhance this program for years to come.

## **Commendations**

1. HOPEhouse provides students a consistent opportunity to take part in self-reflection that is geared towards building self-confidence and independence under strong and effective leadership.
2. HOPEhouse effectively empowers the students to have a voice in their home and the events taking place on a day to day basis.
3. HOPEhouse maintains impressive student records expanding beyond the goals and objectives of the IEP.
4. HOPEhouse is continually seeking new ways to invite the Cotting community to HOPEhouse, simultaneously making sure the students are at the helm of planning these events.
5. HOPEhouse is efficiently providing opportunities for students to apply the various skills they have learned during their time at Cotting to real life situations.

## **Recommendation 1**

The Visiting Committee encourages Cotting School to do an evaluation of the physical structure of HOPEhouse. Are there any improvements that could take place with the kitchen or bathrooms to better serve the students? Are there updates to the appliances or physical space that could enhance the student experience?

## **Recommendation 2**

The Visiting Committee encourages Cotting School to consider the various methods of staffing a residential program. Should the adult mentors focus solely on HOPEhouse? Should there be more of a residential presence with dorm or house parents residing in the building? Should Cotting explore the possibility of expanding the HOPEhouse concept?

## **Recommendation 3**

The Visiting Committee encourages Cotting School to improve the lines of communication between the HOPEhouse and Cotting teams. While they are two entities, improved communication would enhance both programs. Perhaps you would consider having adult mentors in each program engage in peer observations to better understand what each program is doing.

## **Recommendation 4**

The Visiting Committee observed that HOPEhouse is doing impressive work with empowering the students and suggests these strategies be explored across the board at Cotting. Is there opportunity for the leadership team of HOPEhouse to share their strategies and processes with the team at Cotting? Is there an opportunity for HOPEhouse and Capstone to collaborate on fostering self-advocacy?

## **Recommendation 5**

The Visiting Committee encourages Cotting School to reevaluate the marketing that takes place for HOPEhouse. It is such an efficient and effective program that perhaps there is room for more information about the different voices within the program. Perhaps you may want to highlight students who have completed time at Cotting and then move on to HOPEhouse. What has their journey been? How did Cotting prepare them for their time in

HOPEhouse? How can HOPEhouse alumni be engaged in promoting HOPEhouse? Is there an opportunity to feature when an alum visits and/or speaks with current HOPEhouse residents?

# Standard 9: Faculty

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## Standard

There is a sufficient number of appropriately qualified faculty to carry out the mission of the school and the school follows a comprehensive and defined program of professional development that supports continued enhancement of teachers' skills.

## Visiting Team's Assessment

**Standard Met (SM1, SM2):** The students' experience is supported.

**Standard Unmet (SU1, SU2):** The students' experience is compromised.

SM2. Standard Met: Evidences understanding, evolving implementation and planning for improvement.

## Narrative Summary

**Brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to this standard. Text copied from the school's *Self-Study Report* is in italics.**

*An appropriate number of well qualified staff are present to meet the needs of the 108 students. Teaching staff are supported in maintaining professional development, and a standard of excellence and respect is part of the school culture. Staff feel that working conditions are excellent and they have access to all needed materials. Improvements can be made in the areas of policy dissemination, workload & compensation transparency, evaluation of non-classroom staff, and proactive diversity training.*

## Observations

**9a.** *They are looking for candidates who are comfortable interacting with and working with students with moderate and severe needs, and some of this information can be found during the interview process.*

- The Committee concurs with the self-study's statements regarding a thoughtful, deliberate effort to recruit for fit and mission alignment.
- The leadership has been described as "accessible" and "accommodating" above and beyond anything parents have seen before, or thought possible. Based on the professional, real-time, responses, the parents describe full trust in the expertise of the faculty. The staff provide incredible care to the students, and give complete respect to students, as well as to family choice and voice.

*As for providing candidates with the necessary background information about the school, administrators who interview candidates feel this is an integral part of the process, and they strive to provide the same information to all candidates.*

- The Committee agrees with the assessment done by Cotting that the thorough process for orienting potential staff to the mission and culture, as well as the climate of students, facility and faculty in advance of the hiring is evident.

**9b.** Professionals are responsible for keeping their licenses up-to-date, but they are also kept on file at Cotting, and individuals are notified if they have lapsed.

- The onus appears to be on each individual staff member to know their own credential expiration dates, potentially after a lapse, and to address the lapse in order to keep the school records and credentials in compliance.

**9c.** Teachers are selected based on their training and level of expertise in the area of special education. There was some discussion as to the degree to which staff represent a “multicultural society” and the committee would advocate that different methods be used to recruit members of diverse backgrounds.

- There is an obvious level of expertise in special education exhibited by the staff.
- The expertise of the leadership team is recognized and appreciated by the Board of Trustees.
- Multiple staff members noted the lack of diversity on board, faculty and outreach to diverse student/family populations, and further highlighted a need for both training and strategic recruitment.

**9d.** Cotting School has a shared understanding of teaching excellence. This is demonstrated by the quality of students' education, high-quality teaching, and is embedded in the school culture.

- The Committee agrees with Cotting's statement related to teacher excellence.
- Meetings with parents confirmed that Cotting has a high commitment to academic excellence, and the assumption of competence for each student.
- There is evidence of on the job training through immersive exposure to experienced faculty. Is there an opportunity for a formalized training program?

**9e 1 & 2.** All other staff members are also evaluated by their direct supervisor. However, the schedule is not always clear. Evaluation forms can be found in the staff handbook. If a staff member is found to need improvement in certain areas the supervisor will work with them to improve in those areas.

- There does not appear to be a structured, formally documented approach for the monitoring of year-to-year progress/growth around the implementation of actionable goals emerging from an evaluation process. There is a lack of formal system around evaluation.
- There is not a formal, written evaluation, nor annual goal-setting process for the Senior Administration Team.
- While it is obvious that the Senior Administration gives great care and focus to student placement and caseload assignment in the best interest of both students and staff, this work is not visible to the faculty. There appears to be a communication disconnect between what is actually being done and what the staff realize is being done along these lines.
- There is not a defined plan, or checklist, for what occurs at time of termination, including a lack of formal process for consistent communication about terminations to other staff, facility and IT.
- The impression from the role of the Program Assistants indicated that they feel they would benefit from additional attention to praise and recognition, particularly given the high turnover and low wages for this role.

**9f.** Teachers have recently been provided with a “3-year lookout” which allows them to anticipate their personal scheduled raises over the next three years.

- There is a desire among the non-teaching staff, specialists, therapists and program aides, for example, to also have a predictable salary scale published.

*Workloads and caseloads are determined within departments by administration and/or team leaders. Among people in the same position workload should be equivalent, however some individuals have reported (via survey and candid conversation) that there are differences that feel unfair. Working conditions are generally felt to be excellent, within a comfortable physical space and caring community.*



- The Committee agrees with the assessment by the school that there is a lack of sense of “fairness” as it relates to staff compensation. There is a pervasive faculty perception that a disparity exists between administration's view of salary transparency, and equity in work distribution, and the alignment with actual compensation. A sampling of staff comment that they are underpaid.
- The mental health team noted a need for additional support with on call responses. The team indicated that they were “overwhelmed” in meeting this need. The parents commented on the level of appreciation they have for the psychological care the students receive.
- Further, it was noted that the addition of a BCBA to assess safety, provide training and recommendations for behavior modification and on call support would be a benefit to both the staff and the student population. It was perceived by the mental health team that faculty is not prepared, with adequate support, to address behavior incidents, as the primary student population is not comprised of those with significant externalizing behaviors. It was communicated that there were not enough people responsible for the on call schedule to meet the needs, and that having the walkie talkies shared only between 4 people can detract from the time they have to do their jobs.
- There has been a “proof of concept” related to the benefit of a BCBA role. The mental health team has gained insight into the benefit of contracted BCBA services. It is noted that an inherent conflict exists between the nature of a counseling relationship with students, and the same professional being called to respond to intervene in a disciplinary or disruptive issue (it potentially compromises the trust relationship between counselor and student).

**9g.** *The school provides opportunity for outside professional development including time off and reimbursement up to \$800 per year for all staff.*

- Some faculty were unaware that there is a reimbursement for professional development available.
- The mental health team noted a need to implement a regular schedule for consistent training on the *Zones of Regulation* and *Circles Curriculum*, particularly at the beginning of each year, and as a mandatory component of the on-boarding of new staff members in all positions.

**9h.** *The committee interviews and conversation some faculty members report that they have not read or found it easy to access the personnel manual. At the beginning of the school year some, but not all of the personnel policies are outlined as a part of mandatory meetings.*

- The Committee noted that policies are not updated, nor communicated consistently, amongst staff.

## Commendations

1. The empathy, and respect for the individual agency of each student is highlighted consistently by each and every staff member that interacts with the students. All adults in the buildings, from maintenance, nutrition, aides, instructors and administration are undeniably genuine in their care for each student's individual experience.
2. Cotting has cultivated a strong commitment to student experience and high-quality staff. The passion for the mission of Cotting is emanated in every aspect of observations of daily interaction and operations. The number of staff with significant longevity, as well as the happiness of the student's are just two examples of how this is evidenced by Cotting.
3. There is an extremely thorough process for orienting potential staff to the mission and culture, as well as the climate of students, facility and faculty in advance of the hiring, and it is evident in the quality of staff that Cotting retains.

## Recommendation 1

The Visiting Committee recommends that diversity training, and an overt commitment, is made a priority, with a

documented action plan, in an intentional effort to recruit a diverse student population, faculty and board members, as well as the embedding of diversity as part of the curriculum, in all subjects.

## **Recommendation 2**

In order to enhance informed, data-driven decision making around areas of faculty support and policy evolution, the Committee recommends exit interviews for departing staff, and a more structured evaluation, goal-oriented process, including the evaluation of Senior Administration, as part of normal process for Human Resource management. (Cotting might consider an employee, online management portal).

## **Recommendation 3**

The Visiting Committee recommends that a system is put in place to consistently update and make available for reference, the Personnel manual, and that this policy be imbedded into new hire orientation along with the assignment of mentors in all positions. Conversely, a system is needed for formal termination from an IT and system's access perspective. Cotting School would benefit from access to a regularly scheduled platform for the communication of global, "state of the union" to all staff, that includes an open question and answer sharing, or sharing with the entire community from each program leader directly, including topics such as organizational status and/or changes, policies, training opportunities, etc.

## **Recommendation 4**

The Visiting Committee recommends that Cotting consider transparency around the ability to project salary scales/compensation available, in total package, across all positions within the organization. Further, that there is an effort to increase understanding around workload.

## **Recommendation 5**

The Visiting Committee recommends that Cotting senior administration meet with the mental health team to assess the value of adding a BCBA to the team, as well as to discuss the way that the on call services are disseminated across a large enough number of trained first responders whose composition and size are adequately proportional to the population size. Further the offering of Registered Behavior Technician training could be considered as an offering to better equip the responding teams to address this need.

# Standard 10: Administration

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## Standard

The administration provides leadership and maintains a structure to facilitate the effective functioning of the school, including the participation of faculty in decision-making.

## Visiting Team's Assessment

**Standard Met (SM1, SM2):** The students' experience is supported.

**Standard Unmet (SU1, SU2):** The students' experience is compromised.

SM1. Standard Met: Evidences clear understanding, effective implementation and thorough planning for further improvement.

## Narrative Summary

**Brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to this standard. Text copied from the school's *Self-Study Report* is in italics.**

*Cotting School's administration works consistently through collaboration and with educational expertise to establish an inclusive, supportive, educational environment for staff and students alike. Cotting School's governing board is a diverse collection of individuals from a variety of fields, that collectively work to ensure sound financial health and a cutting edge and safe educational environment for today and the future. The administration organizes collaborative weekly meetings to oversee educational programming and provides a forum to discuss and brainstorm around the structural and programmatic framework. The administration provides opportunities for administrative and faculty-wide personal and professional growth and development.*

*Cotting School's administration "provides leadership and maintains a structure to facilitate the effective functioning of the school, including the participation of faculty in decision-making", as stated in Standard 10. The administration effectively carries out the program and policies of the school and maintain the qualifications required by their areas of expertise. Administrators continually involve faculty in decision-making about the program of the school to promote both community and collaboration. The administration assures review and evaluation to maintain the most appropriate and up-to-date curriculum. Throughout the entirety of these processes, the administration is regularly undergoing self-evaluation to ensure smooth operation of the school on a daily basis. The school also has a defined program for the evaluation and supervision of administrators.*

*The administration assures review and evaluation of the educational program and provides that a current curriculum plan is in place. Administration organizes Curriculum Work Groups weekly to discuss curricula and issues of practice. Curriculum Work Groups comprised of all faculty share their products or instructional processes with the remaining faculty and staff. The Instructional Leadership Team, comprised of a select group of professionals representing a variety of departments school wide, meets on a weekly basis to discuss implementation of curricula. The Summer Curriculum Institute, comprised of a small, rotating group of dedicated staff, meet during the summer term to research and develop curriculum in a targeted area of need, designated by the teaching faculty.*

## Observations

The Visiting Committee was impressed by the comprehensive qualifications, expertise, experience and dedication of the administrative team at Cotting. It was evident that this team works closely together to address the needs of their varying constituencies as a means to support student experience and foster institutional growth. It was also evident that the administrative team demonstrates an ongoing commitment to the professional development of the faculty, as well as to their own continuous improvement. The visit afforded opportunities to both affirm this work through interviews with various stakeholders, related documents and surveys, as well as to look more closely at areas that are worth additional consideration and reflection.

The Visiting Committee also observed that the administrative team identifies opportunities for faculty to engage in leadership experiences as a means to further their professional growth, such as curriculum workgroups, the curriculum summer institute, and serving on various committees. Teachers report that they have been recognized by the administration for their unique talents and that they are provided with leadership opportunities that help to enhance those strengths. However, it was noted that in regards to addressing future leadership needs within the institution, there is no evidence of a strategic approach plan to faculty growth, leadership development, and succession planning.

The administration confirmed that consistent and appropriate evaluations are in place for the administrative team, however, upon further review it was clarified that the CAO and COO do not receive formal written evaluations from the President. Additionally, faculty communicated that *the administration is open to discussion regarding any aspect of the program, both positive aspects, and those aspects that may indicate that some change is necessary.*

The visiting team recognizes the magnitude of the responsibility shouldered by the senior administrative team, in some cases exceeding the capacity of the team to meet the diverse demands of the program without engaging an expanded corps of leaders to share the responsibilities. The lack of systems, processes and protocols in a number of critical areas contribute to inefficiencies in operations and may lead to unnecessary risk.

## Conclusions and Explanation of Rating

Although the self-study does not contain any specific delineation of strengths and weaknesses for the administration standard, the Visiting Committee concurs with the school's rating of an **SM1**. Based on the report and conversations with various stakeholders, it is clear that the school is committed to continuous improvement. The Administrative Leadership Team has the expertise and qualifications to lead the school. Shared decision-making is achieved through collaborative engagement of faculty such as participation on the Instructional Leadership team (ILT).

## Commendations

The Visiting Committee commends the administration for:

1. Their unwavering commitment and dedication to the students and families served by Cotting.
2. Their commitment to providing a robust professional development program for faculty and staff, as well as providing faculty with opportunities for leadership.

## Recommendation 1

The visiting committee recommends that the Cotting Administrative Leadership Team explore a framework for leadership development including a more strategic approach to succession planning.

## **Recommendation 2**

The visiting committee recommends that the Cotting Administrative Leadership Team focus on delegation of responsibilities/tasks, when appropriate, and the development of systems and protocols to improve operational efficiencies (i.e., Communication, Data Mangement, etc.).

## **Recommendation 3**

The visiting committee recommends that the informal evaluations conducted by the President with the CAO and COO are documented in writing annually inclusive of goal setting.

# Standard 11: Evaluation and Assessment

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## Standard

The school engages in forms of programmatic assessment consistent with fulfilling its mission and core values. This data is used to inform decision-making and planning.

## Visiting Team's Assessment

**Standard Met (SM1, SM2):** The students' experience is supported.

**Standard Unmet (SU1, SU2):** The students' experience is compromised.

SM2. Standard Met: Evidences understanding, evolving implementation and planning for improvement.

## Narrative Summary

**Brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to this standard. Text copied from the school's *Self-Study Report* is in italics.**

*Cotting School engages in ongoing evaluation and assessment processes to ensure that our organization, programs, and services are meeting the needs of our faculty, students and staff. Programmatically, Cotting has worked hard to implement more structured longitudinal assessment practices, especially in the areas of literacy and math, to better monitor student progress and inform instructional and curricular decisions. Additionally, Cotting has conducted evaluations of key aspects of the program including the science curriculum, behavioral interventions and supports, three year reevaluation process, progress reports, IEP writing, and community inclusion experiences.*

*As a Massachusetts Chapter 766 school, Cotting must adhere to all state special education regulations. This includes comprehensive program review and evaluation by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education every three years. In addition to ensuring that Cotting is meeting all regulatory requirements to maintain quality assurance, these reviews include staff interviews, parent surveys, and a review of students' programs and schedules. Appropriate administration of and participation in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) or MCAS-Alt portfolio system is also monitored by the Department.*

*The faculty and staff supervision process is an area of relative strength with staff indicating they feel supported by their supervisor and have access to the resources they need to do their jobs effectively. While evaluations are provided, the evaluation schedule is somewhat variable and is usually decided by individual supervisors. Cotting would benefit from a clear and consistent evaluation schedule for all faculty and staff.*

## Observations

The Visiting Committee agrees with the Cotting School's appraisal of their evaluation and assessment. The school is working to improve their evaluations and assessments.

***11a. The school conducts annual program review and revision based on assessment of student performance.***

Each student's IEP is reviewed annually. Per Massachusetts law, the school uses the MCAS and MCAS-Alt to monitor student progress as well. A full time alternative assessment assistant was created to assist teachers with the collection of artifacts and the organization of the MCAS portfolio. Students are routinely assessed but there needs to be improvements on how those data are shared and it is unclear how it may influence the program. Each student living in the HOPEhouse Residential Program completes an Independent Living Assessment at the beginning and conclusion of each school year.

**11b. The school uses some form of longitudinal assessment of student performance (such as portfolio assessment).**

Cotting School continues to work to improve longitudinal assessment. While testing does take place, there is no concrete system to collect and share data on students. Every three years, the student's homeroom teacher, CT, OT, and PT teams complete a review of student progress and use this testing to compile a list of goals for the future. The type of testing administered to the student is up to the discretion of the test administrator. The evaluator then makes recommendations based on the tests administered. Tests include Becker Work Adjustment Profiles, Roll Evaluation of Activities of Life (REAL), Woodcock Johnson, and Key Math.

Student progress is shared informally with parents via telephone and email and also through a quarterly progress report.

The school also uses the Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE) program to evaluate literacy. Students are also evaluated using curriculum based measurements such as the SIPPS program for phonics, Achieve Online for reading, and Math You See for mathematics. Cotting School uses both summative and formative assessment. In 2012, the school began to have students with intensive special needs remain in school beyond age 9. Cotting School is still working to create ways to evaluate these students and to best meet their needs.

**11c. & 11d. The school conducts exit interviews of students and faculty and uses the data to inform admissions and program planning. The school has procedures to follow-up on the experiences of alumni/ae and uses the data to inform admissions and program planning.**

Interviews are in place for departing staff and students however the results are anecdotal rather than data driven. This results are not done consistently or with reliability. Information gained from these interviews is not tracked.

**11e. The school brings in consultants and/or visitors from other schools to participate in the periodic evaluation of programs.**

The school recently worked with Tyton Partners to assist with strategic planning and marketing. Cotting has hosted security consultants to assist in preparing for an emergency. Cotting also hosts the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to ensure compliance with executing IEPs every three years. The school also recently served as a pilot school for the Center for Assessment collecting data from MAAPS affiliated schools.

**11f. The vitality/influence of the mission in the life of the school is assessed.**

The mission is reviewed each year by the board and voted on at the annual meeting.

**11.g The school participates in state sponsored learning results activities, as appropriate.**

The school participates in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System as well as MCAS-Alt based on the abilities of the student.

**11.h The school carries out programs for supervision and evaluation of all personnel that are understood by all concerned.**

Staff evaluation schedules and guidelines are clearly outlined in the staff handbook. Staff expressed concern to the Visiting Committee about equity in supervision and evaluation of their performance.

**11.i. Those responsible for leadership engage in periodic self-evaluation of their performance.**

The leadership team reports it does engage in periodic self-evaluation through cooperative meetings of the leadership team, professional development, work with NEASC and other projects; however, there is no documentation of this reflection.

**11.j The School develops and publishes a policy and plan on diversity and difference, derived from its mission and core values, that is used to evaluate the status of the school in this regard and to guide planning to achieve goals.**

Cotting has recognized diversity as an area of need. Currently, the school population is incredibly diverse in abilities but the school views its lack of diversity as an area of concern.

## **Commendations**

1. The Visiting Committee commends the Cotting School on recognizing the need for more data driven assessment and evaluation to steer progress.
2. The Visiting Committee commends the Cotting School for the addition of a full time Alternative Assessment staff as we see this as a high need area due to the diverse and changing nature of the student body.
3. The Visiting Committee commends the Cotting School on the Summer Institute which gives staff time to focus on the creation, content, and differentiations of curricula to meet the needs of all students.

## **Recommendation 1**

The Visiting Committee agrees with Cotting's recommendation of, *"Discuss and design a more optimized system for compiling 3 year reports, with the goal of using the data longitudinally."* and recognizes the challenges staff face with student evaluation and that alternative assessment is often required. We recommend Cotting School continue its goal of a more data driven system for evaluating students more frequently than a three year time period. Continuity with the same test being administered during multiple three year reports could be beneficial for analysis and goal setting for IEPs and curriculum skills.

## **Recommendation 2**

The Visiting Committee agrees with The Cotting School's recommendation of, *"Determine a way to gather data from families of students who have graduated from Cotting and use it to improve the program."* Conducting exit interviews of alumni/ae and staff which would be valuable in tracking their future plans and using feedback to consider for future curriculum and planning purposes.

## **Recommendation 3**

The Visiting Committee agrees with Cotting School that it, *"Discuss how Cotting School can streamline the transition for students between different teachers and therapists year to year."* and recommends that staff continues to collaborate to create new ways to monitor student performance and achievement and to share that information with all stakeholders.



## **Recommendation 4**

The Cotting School evaluate the grading system and reporting, how it is being communicated, and consider sharing more data with parents and stakeholders.

# Standard 12: Health and Safety

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## Standard

The school is a safe place that supports the physical, emotional and cognitive health and development of all students, faculty and staff.

## Visiting Team's Assessment

**Standard Met (SM1, SM2):** The students' experience is supported.

**Standard Unmet (SU1, SU2):** The students' experience is compromised.

SM2. Standard Met: Evidences understanding, evolving implementation and planning for improvement.

## Narrative Summary

**Brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to this standard. Text copied from the school's *Self-Study Report* is in italics.**

*Cotting School is a safe place to work and go to school. Throughout our review and meetings, we have found evidence that the faculty, programs, and facilities support the physical, emotional, and cognitive health and development of the students and families. There are several areas that require evolving implementation and planning for improvement.*

## Observations

Overall, the culture and practices of Cotting School place primary emphasis on ensuring interventions are based on the child's best interests. Throughout this section, consideration of the physical and emotional health and safety of students drives all decisions, occasionally preventing attention to other school-wide needs. Multiple opportunities to observe and listen to staff and students describe how those practices are carried out and the powerful effects of experiencing Cotting as a safe school where students feel protected, respected, and listened to. Although less obvious, there are also mechanisms in place to protect staff from unnecessary risks related to caring for and interacting with students and maintaining the school in clean and sanitary condition to meet student needs.

Specific opportunities for continuing improvement were presented by school staff in the self-study and in conversations throughout the visit, and all seem to welcome recommendations for consideration.

***12.a. -The school's culture and climate, policies and procedures, rooted in inclusivity and empathy, honor the dignity of every person in their community.***

Evidence of the deliberate and genuine desire to be inclusive and respectful was observed throughout the visit, including by showcasing student participation across a variety of abilities and venues. Administrative and direct service activities center on this theme that resonates throughout and figures significantly in all decisions that affect students.

**12.b. -Students affirm they are supported in the development of relationships (student to student and student to faculty) based in trust and mutual respect.**

Students willingly offered their feelings of relief for themselves and for their parents upon entry into Cotting; they feel they do truly belong among their fellow students. Although voiced powerfully in meeting with middle and upper school students, the carryover of that level of security was evident at the HOPEHouse evening meeting where open, direct communication to address feelings was carefully guided by faculty so that skills of conflict resolution were practiced with residents demonstrating compassion and empathy for others. They have friendships that add protections for students who didn't have friends before, in addition to the support they receive from faculty, staff, and parents. Students who have attended Cotting for a number of years reported appreciation with these statements: "I would rather do things for myself" and at Cotting I can; "I feel respected"; "They treat us like a regular student."

**12.c. - The school has appropriate services and personnel to support the emotional, social, and psychological needs of the students.**

The Mental Health team includes counselor, psychologists, and the director of nursing who reported the increased student need for their intervention, from time to time, to assist with emotional and/or behavioral dysregulation. This is despite the competence of faculty to educate around Zones of Regulation and Circles that teach students these management skills, and to intervene as needed. Those on-call Mental Health faculty carry Walkie Talkies to promote a quick response time. When faculty need support in the moment, any of the Mental Health team may be called to help with the intervention, pulling them from their primary work. Moreover, the services of the Mental Health team have requested additional support, whether in the form of a BCBA or other trained professional, who could assume primary responsibility for immediate response, as well as to coordinate and strengthen classroom management of social and emotional support of students, ideally as preventative strategies.

Sadly, the school experienced the unexpected deaths of several students in the last year, so that conversations with older students who knew or were friends of those students revealed continued sadness at the loss. In those conversations, students shared the support they received, allowing them to express grief as well as fears related to the similarities of those students' profiles to their own.

**12.d. - The school thoroughly and regularly educates and trains all personnel in the legal requirements of mandatory reporting, appropriate emotional and physical boundaries, and healthy relationships.**

The Committee reviewed the processes by which all staff are trained and reminded of their responsibilities regarding Mandatory Reporting of suspicions of possible abuse or neglect, regardless of whether the school senior level administration agree with the need for reporting. Additionally, anti-bullying policy enforcement and training needs to include support staff in the principles of the Circles program. This program which focuses on appropriate touch and boundaries for self-protection, are essential for this population of students at increased risk, and are supported at Cotting.

**12.e. - The school hires personnel using thorough and consistent practices, including background checks and personal references.**

As reported.

**12.f. - The school's policy for written professional references respects both the integrity of author and subject and the necessity for honesty and candor.**

Same as above.

**12.g. - The physical facilities and staffing for healthcare appropriately address the needs of the student body, whether residential or day.**

Medical services are currently provided in a small area where all medical treatments, personal care, and other health-related services are provided by nine nurses and two nursing assistants (CNAs). Some medical administration takes place wherever the student might be within the building. All student personal care is provided in the medical services center, with very limited toileting facilities and manual lifts available to assure

safe transfer for the student and avoid staff injury. The scarcity of private toileting/changing facilities, given the number of students needing assistance, is significant. However, we recognize the plan to expand this dedicated area along with the plan to relocate some services as construction of new facilities is undertaken. At some times of the day, (particularly on arrival, after lunch and before dismissal), there are lines of students outside the office, waiting to be served according to a triage system managed by the nurse at the entrance. Services are delivered by any of the qualified staff who are available, despite the assignment of students to nursing caseloads. Severe shortage of space for personal care results in as much as ½ hour away from the program activities scheduled for a student requiring care. The insufficiency of portable lifts significantly compromises the safety of students and staff, in the event the urgency for assistance results in unsafe lifting practices.

All student medications are stored in this office, with emergency meds in a locking cabinet within the director of nursing supervisor's office. All medications and equipment needed for treatments are also stored in the nursing department, with daily record keeping of services provided logged into FalconNet. Awareness of this need for appropriate space is explicitly addressed within plans for near-future renovations and will be welcomed. Students with prescriptions for emergency med administration in the event of an extended seizure require that a nurse travel with that student to all off-campus activities, thereby adding to the back-up of students needing medical services. Medical records travel with staff during all off-campus trips.

HOPEHouse staff receive mandated staff med administration training, provided by the Cotting director of nursing who checks in on residents each morning and afternoon. Otherwise, HOPEHouse trained staff administer medications to residents. HOPEHouse director serves as on-call contact for HOPEHouse emergencies, requiring that students in this program have relatively stable health care needs and more independent mobility than those in the general school population. This separate criteria for inclusion in HOPEHouse is intended to reduce risk within the residential program.

Goals of increasing independence of students are occasionally at odds with concerns for safety but with prudent planning and oversight, students are given opportunities beyond what might be expected of those with physical disabilities, e.g., ski trips, riding the HOPEHouse elevator alone, reportedly using power tools in woodshop.

Emergency intercom system, other than use of walkie/talkies by Mental Health team, was not activated during the visit, unless that is the same system also used for all-school announcements. If so, that was not audible in some sections of the building,

***12.h. - Facilities and staff for food services are adequate and the quality of the food meets reasonable nutritional requirements.***

Occupational therapy oversees the student feeding program at Cotting. Alternatives to the main meal served students seem adequate to address food allergies/intolerances of students. Modified meal consistency was not observed and will be confirmed. Individualized feeding equipment is recommended and provided by OT, with food services washing and maintaining feeding equipment. After being cleaned and stored, students take responsibility for setting out at appropriate tables for use at the next mealtime. FalconNet contains each student's feeding plan described so that feeders will know to safely feed students needing modifications of feeding processes and food.

***12.i. - The school's Crisis Response Plan is comprehensive, understood and practiced by faculty, staff, students and, where appropriate, parents.***

Frequent fire drills are reported and fewer but effective lockdown drills build trust among students that the staff can be counted upon to protect them. Committee agrees this is a comprehensive plan that is posted in many areas throughout the building.

***12.j. -The school community continually audits and validates the systems, facilities and practices that ensure the safety of the school community.***

***Security officer?***

**12.k. – There is a person or committee with responsibility for reviewing safety provisions for on-campus and off-campus activities, including field trips, athletic events, wilderness expeditions, etc.**e supported by staff report.

**12.l. - The school requires appropriate adult-student supervision during school hours and all school-sponsored student activities and programs.**

Student to teacher ratios are appropriate throughout program activities.

**12.m. – The school has a reporting procedure in place to document and follow-up on any incidents regarding health and safety of students and staff.**

Medical services are systematically recorded and reported in FalconNet, with reports of incidents and changed status to parents.

## **Conclusions and Explanation of Rating**

Cotting School takes strides to ensure the safety of each community member. The Visiting Committee took note that security begins with admission to each building through the use of a main door-bell system. Upon arrival on the first day of visiting Cotting, it took a period of time to receive an answer to our call to the security desk to be admitted into the building. We were waiting with volunteer staff who seemed accustomed to this routine. Perhaps you might consider having this system monitored with an earlier start time.

We observed that the individual who is working at the front desk has several duties. They are observing a screen with footage of all the school cameras, taking care of sign-in of all people arriving at Cotting, answering all phone calls, responsible for being the bridge to “on call” support from the Mental Health team, and more. The Visiting Committee wonders if there might be consideration of reevaluating how each of these duties are handled to ensure the general safety of each community member is not compromised.

The Visiting Committee remains impressed with the facilities at Cotting, even in regards to Health & Safety. An area of concern where the student experience is potentially compromised is due to the long period of time out of class waiting for medical and/or toileting services. Additionally, the tight spaces and less-than-ideal toileting environment could be viewed as a compromise to the student experience. Given the proactive plans to enhance the medical facilities, the Visiting Committee encourages you to take these observations into consideration.

Through conversations with several students, it was reported that there are frequent fire drills and occasional lockdown drills. Students did make mention of a recent lockdown situation where they felt safe and cared for. It was noted, however, that the students perhaps needed more support in understanding the event and having time to process how to reflect as a community on the events that took place. While the physical and emotional safety of the students were attended to in the moment, it might be useful to strategize how the aftermath of such situations is handled.

## **Commendations**

1. Throughout the school, Cotting staff consistently demonstrate their dedication to a culture that genuinely respects each student by their reassurance of their commitment to keeping them safe, both physically and emotionally. Given the medical fragility and vulnerability of Cotting students, this pervasive approach is especially valued. Students routinely offer comments of how comfortable they are and their parents feel in this welcoming and supportive environment. To Cotting's credit, the justified concerns for student safety are met by incorporating controls to minimize risk while at the same time enabling students to participate in activities and outings that might otherwise be considered beyond their risk tolerance. Examples of this include frequent and purposeful trips into the community as needed to support inclusion and transition

support, taking the HOPEhouse elevator alone to promote independence, celebrating with their community of peers by skiing and traveling to DisneyWorld for the senior class trip.

2. Written records of provision of student medical services are routinely maintained in FalconNet. Similarly, plans to address medical concerns off campus travel with students and in the case of emergency procedures, a nurse also travels with the student.

## **Recommendation 1**

It is recognized by Cotting administration and the Committee that modified facilities and additional equipment for the purpose of providing Medical Services is needed. This is especially critical in the provision of personal care for a significant proportion (approximately 25%) of students who need this assistance. Plans for renovating medical facilities is planned, and we would recommend that those facilities include ceiling-mounted or other installed lift systems and additional private toileting and changing spaces in areas that are as bright, cheerful and inviting as all the others in the school, giving the space a less-clinical feel. Until the new facilities are completed, Cotting will need to address these concerns with its current physical limitations.

## **Recommendation 2**

It is further recommended that consideration be given to increasing the nursing assistant pool to provide personal care under the direction of the nurses. Reducing wait times and increasing responsivity to personal care needs could free nurses to deliver services more consistent with their license and scope of practice. In addition, transport to medical services currently provided by teacher assistants, taking them from classroom duties, could be shared with nursing paraprofessionals.

## **Recommendation 3**

It is recommended that all staff be included in trainings that have to do with protection of students, specifically principles of the Circles program, and others that affect student protections, even though support staff have no direct care student care responsibilities. They are part of the Cotting community and have frequent incidental contact with students.

## **Recommendation 4**

The visiting committee recommends that Cotting assess the growth of the student population who require frequent medical services. The number of medically needy and fragile students has increased significantly in the past decade. We encourage Cotting to determine the appropriate maximum of students in this category.

# Standard 13: Communication

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## Standard

The school maintains effective systems of external and internal communication and record keeping that inform all constituents and facilitate participation where appropriate.

## Visiting Team's Assessment

**Standard Met (SM1, SM2):** The students' experience is supported.

**Standard Unmet (SU1, SU2):** The students' experience is compromised.

SM2. Standard Met: Evidences understanding, evolving implementation and planning for improvement.

## Narrative Summary

**Brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to this standard. Text copied from the school's *Self-Study Report* is in italics.**

*Cotting School excels in many areas as they relate to this standard. The school maintains open communication between, families, districts, faculty and staff. Parents and families have many opportunities to give and receive feedback from teachers, therapists, and administration through email, in-person meetings, phone calls, as well as information sessions, conferences, and workshops that are presented throughout the school year. We strive to communicate effectively with districts in regard to the admissions process, tuition rates, and any pertinent meetings regarding their students.*

*Internal communication is primarily sustained via email and the school's own database (FalconNet). Faculty and staff are informed of changes, events, important information through email as well as an automated system when necessary. FalconNet contains helpful information about students for various departments. Cotting School keeps accurate records for students, both current and former, and staff and faculty. These are locked and secured to maintain confidentiality.*

*While the school does an excellent job of communicating in some areas, there are others that could be improved. Creating a more streamlined way of communicating to parents academic and curriculum updates, and student achievement/challenges for example, may be useful in the future. There could also be better communication between departments and teams, particularly in regard to the sharing of information and collaboration amongst faculty and staff. The emergency system could also use updating, specifically how to inform staff about emergencies that happen on campus.*

## Observations

The Visiting Committee observed that the communication at Cotting School occurs on a frequent basis among teaching and multidisciplinary clinical staff, administration, parents, and sending school districts, in a wide variety of ways. Staff seem to enjoy working with each other and appear to have a foundation of trust, collaboration, and shared passion for working with their student population and toward the shared mission of the school. While it appears that communication is a priority at the Cotting School so as to ensure student and program success and integration, a common theme observed was that communication systems seemed to be created on an individual and/or as needed basis, and appear to be informal and/or reactive in nature. For instance, teachers are

presented as the primary communication liaison for parents, yet, there is no systematic model for this communication system, as it is on a case by case basis. Another example, despite the high amount of interdisciplinary staff involved in working with a student given their diverse medical, clinical, and academic needs, there is no lead staff or case manager to act as primary liaison to manage flow of communication regarding individual students' needs, progress, and functioning on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis within departments and/or with parents.

Another communication theme which emerged is that the information that is disseminated regarding student progress is largely centered around the IEP process (e.g. quarterly progress reports, etc.). However, through observation and discussion with various staff and parents, it does not seem that additional information regarding student progress outside the IEP are fully conveyed or captured by the current system of communication Cotting School offers to parents and/or districts. For instance, there does not seem to be a systematic way to convey student progress to parents/districts regarding participation in specials (e.g. art, music, industrial arts, etc.), student work habits, social emotional development, and/or ongoing progress monitoring stemming from classroom or curriculum based measures. It seems that by not having a systematic means for conveying this information, it may be a missed opportunity to capture and convey how each child is excelling and moving forward in a wider variety of ways to significant stakeholders (parents, sending school districts).

The Visiting Committee also observed that despite all of the various groups of employees with a wide range of clinical backgrounds (e.g. psychologists, CT's, OT's, PT's, medical staff, etc.), Cotting School does not have an administrator in the position of Clinical Director. Adding such a role, or something similar, may be beneficial toward the goal of further enhancing the integrative nature of the Cotting School service delivery model; it also may assist with the need conveyed by the mental health staff for more guidance, implementation support, and teacher consultation around developing systematic behavioral interventions, through the supervision and lens of a more integrated clinical approach. Finally, having a Clinical Director may help with streamlining the process of communication and supervision of the various clinical providers, and may further enhance the model of providing students with support toward reaching their educational goals in the context of a strong, nurturing, safe therapeutic environment.

***13.a.- The school maintains complete and accurate records for both current and former students that are protected against loss by fire or theft and are available only to authorized persons.***

The Visiting Committee observed that student educational files are complete and maintained in the Student Services office, with an administrator present on site. It was unclear based upon observation alone whether the file cabinets housing the student files/binders were in fact fire-proof. Each paper copy of the student file/binder did include a log sheet to document individuals who review that file on a given date/time.

There does not seem to be a digital database of this complete paper file system at this time. However, the school has developed its own database, Falcon.net, which allows staff to input information regarding medical records/notes, service provider assignments, student demographic information, release/consent forms, emergency contact information, and sending school district information. It is unclear, however, which staff have access to what aspects of student information within this system, and how that is determined. In talking with some staff, there was a perception that Falcon.net is only for medical-related data entry, but in talking with staff within the IT department, it seems that more information is available within the system. This database appears to be static in nature, rather than a dynamic platform by which staff can share and exchange information in a more real-time interactive manner. The database used to maintain IEP information digitally is Frontline/ESPED.

***13.b.- The school publishes current school policies and procedures in handbooks or makes them readily available in other forms to the affected constituencies, and effectively implements the policies as published.***

The Visiting Committee observed various policy handbooks developed for the Cotting School, including Admissions Handbook, Student Handbook, Parent Handbook, Personnel Handbook, Policies & Procedures Manual, Healthcare Policies, Emergency Procedures Guide, and Parent/Staff Directory. It is unclear to the Visiting Committee how information within these various policy handbooks are disseminated to all staff in a way that ensures an accurate, clear and practical understanding of the information from year to year. Through



discussion with various staff, even those which have been Cotting School employees for several years, it seems that some information in the personnel handbook, for example, is not known.

**13.c.- The school has a mechanism in place for input from staff into decision-making regarding personnel policies, budget preparation, and other areas, as appropriate.**

While faculty/staff felt that they do have some involvement in decision making and/or an ability to provide administration with impressions of potential employee candidates during the interview process, they did not feel that they have involvement or clear understanding and/or transparency regarding existing and/or projected salary schedules, decisions and policy for all existing staff and/or budget processes.

**13.d.- Information regarding the financial responsibilities of the parent/guardian or student to the institution is clearly stated in writing and is made available prior to enrollment.**

Most students are referred through their sending school districts and funded publicly. However, when a student is privately funded by the parents, Cotting School includes the parents' financial responsibilities in detail within the student's acceptance letter to the program.

**13.e.- There is a procedure for determining equitable adjustments in tuition and other financial obligations existing between the parent/guardian and the institution.**

The Visiting Committee agrees with Cotting School's statement on this indicator.

*Tuition is the same for all students regardless of service delivery. Exceptions include the use of an Orientation and Mobility (O&T) or Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI). Cotting does not provide these services. The district is responsible for the contracting and cost of these additional services. This information is clearly stated to the student's family and sending district prior to the start of services.*

**13.f.- Appropriate channels are available for parents to reflect their concerns and interests to school personnel.**

The parents have various ways to reflect their concerns and interests to school personnel. Observations made by the Visiting Committee suggest that the classroom teacher is the primary source of parent communication, combined with ongoing family support and outreach provided by the Family Support Coordinator and School Psychologist. The Family Support Coordinator sends out weekly newsletters to all parents reflecting Cotting School events each week and community resources available to families; this newsletter has been very positively received by the parent population. Support is also provided to parents by both the Family Support Coordinator and School Psychologist on an individual, as needed basis, through phone and/or face to face meetings and/or consultation. Communication with the administrative team is also available upon request by parents to meet to discuss their child when/if concerns arise. Parent/Teacher conferences are also held once per year, in addition to monthly PAC meetings.

**13.g.- Student progress is reported regularly to parents in a clear and comprehensive manner.**

While parents are informed of their child's educational progress on a quarterly, annual, and three year basis, as mandated by Special Education law, there is no other formalized manner by which parents and/or districts are informed of their student's progress toward everyday or weekly/monthly goals in other areas (e.g. academic, social, emotional, behavior) relevant to their level of growing independence or adaptive functioning. Anecdotal information, such as teacher driven portfolios and/or daily/weekly communication logs/journals sent home to parents, are made available upon request or created as part of an individual classroom communication routine, but no evidence of formal, school-wide communication systems to convey student progress to parents/districts outside the IEP process were observed. The Visiting Committee was informed that no report cards or grading system is in place to track such progress at this time.

**13.h.- The school structures ways to work with parents/guardians proactively. The school is aware of the ways in which families from diverse backgrounds and socio-economic status are affected by school policies and programs.**

The Visiting Committee observed that staff did consistently indicate that the development of close family partnerships, trust and communication are a critical component to the success of their program. The Family Support Coordinator and School Psychologist act as important resources to families in this regard, as do the staff who work with students transitioning from Cotting School to post secondary life.

*Cotting seeks to represent all backgrounds in curriculum and school culture and support students' differences.* Through discussion with the mental health team and senior administrative team, it seems that they are in the process of exploring an appropriate curriculum that their students can access to broaden their understanding and exposure to diversity issues, including but not limited to gender differences and sexual orientation.

**13.i.- The school maintains complete and accurate records for staff and faculty members that are available only to authorized persons and are protected against loss by fire, theft, or technological failure.**

The personnel files for retired and/or terminated employees are located in the human resource office, which is either occupied by staff or locked for confidentiality. The personnel files for current employees are located in the business office in two locked, wooden file cabinets, also in a space occupied by a staff person.

## **Commendations**

1. The Visiting Committee commends Cotting School for their dedication and efforts to prioritize the importance of building and maintaining strong communication, trust, and partnerships among staff and with various stakeholders.
2. The Visiting Committee commends Cotting School's senior administrative team for the cohesive partnership and close communication they appear to have established with one another as they lead their staff toward positive outcomes.
3. The Visiting Committee commends Cotting School's staff for their organic efforts, driven by their collective passion to support students, to ensure frequent communication regarding student needs internally and by providing support to Cotting School families.

## **Recommendation 1**

The Visiting Committee recommends that Cotting School establish a more formalized, systematic means of communication which captures the progress students are demonstrating outside the IEP process to be shared with significant stakeholders such as parents and sending school districts. An example for consideration may be that a quarterly standards based report card be developed. Such a report card may include information regarding student progress based upon academic learning standards and/or curriculum based measures, progress observed in specials (e.g. music, industrial arts, etc.), evidence of growth in the areas of social emotional development and/or student work habits.

## **Recommendation 2**

The Visiting Committee recommends that Cotting School establish a more systematic, formalized means of internal communication between departments and among staff. An example of how this may be accomplished is to shift to a case manager model or something similar. This designated individual would ideally have a manageable number of students on their caseload and would act as the primary liaison to manage flow of communication regarding individual students' needs, progress, and functioning on a daily, weekly, monthly, or annual basis within departments and/or with parents. This approach would further enhance the integrated service delivery model observed at the Cotting School as well.

### **Recommendation 3**

The Visiting Committee recommends that Cotting School develop a more formalized and regular model of parent/teacher communication. An example of this may be that an expectation is established that all teachers have a minimum once per week email or phone communication with parents. Another example would be to set an expectation that all teachers have a classroom website, and/or all teachers offer a classroom instagram account.

### **Recommendation 4**

Given the multidisciplinary nature of Cotting School, the Visiting Committee recommends that other communication database systems be explored that may offer a more dynamic platform by which staff can share and exchange information in a more real-time, interactive manner during the school day. An example of a database system such as Bluestep software or something similar might be beneficial to explore.

### **Recommendation 5**

The Visiting Committee recommends that Cotting School review procedures and develop established protocols for ensuring access to student files is removed for terminated personnel.

# Standard 14: Infrastructure

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## Standard

There are adequate resources (personnel, finances, facilities, equipment, and materials) to provide for the overall institutional needs of the school.

## Visiting Team's Assessment

**Standard Met (SM1, SM2):** The students' experience is supported.

**Standard Unmet (SU1, SU2):** The students' experience is compromised.

SM1. Standard Met: Evidences clear understanding, effective implementation and thorough planning for further improvement.

## Narrative Summary

**Brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to this standard. Text copied from the school's *Self-Study Report* is in italics.**

*Cotting is committed to having a strong infrastructure to provide for the overall needs of the school and support the programs. Cotting is fortunate to have financial resources to supplement tuition income, but is prudent to limit spending of this income to ensure that it is available to continue to support the work of the school for years to come.*

The buildings and grounds are in excellent condition; the organization clearly takes great pride in the campus they provide for their students. Cotting is in a healthy financial position, supported, in part, by a large endowment. Cotting has an evolving lens through which they are presently fine-tuning their approach to marketing, advancement and creativity for identifying development opportunities. They will benefit from a planning process around back office and data systems, as well as a formalized technology plan.

## Observations

*Design features of the school and grounds have been considered so that independent mobility and physical access are not compromised.*

- There are virtually no barriers to the grounds for students to navigate the facility.

*14a. – The school has appropriate procedures for accounting and for auditing the accounts of the school.*

- There is not a significant level of input into the budget development from those at the program leadership level.
- There is not a predictable and regularly scheduled venue established between the CFO and CEO to communicate around finances outside of preparation for audit, board and finance meetings.

- Cotting takes the time necessary to ensure that the Board of Trustees has a transparent communication platform related to finances. This allows the board to make educated and informed, well-thought out decisions.

14b. *The school has multiple resources, including publicly funded tuition, endowment dollars, and fundraising/donations. The annual budget draws no more than 4% of the endowment annually.*

- The Visiting Committee agrees that Cotting maintains a strong financial position to meet the resource needs of the organization.
- There does not seem to be communicated planning around reducing dependence on the endowment income as a budget-balancing resource.
- The school has a well-designed and accessible theater, however, it is often not available for use by the performing arts classes, as it is frequently rented out to outside parties. The educator in this area noted that Cotting may benefit from the consideration of the program needs of the student performing arts education, and create a schedule for outside use around those program needs in collaboration with the educator.

14d. *Cotting has a beautiful campus that is adequately maintained.*

- The Committee agrees with Cotting's assessment of the school as a top-notch facility, including aesthetics, grounds, facilities, cleanliness, welcoming and accessible environment, etc.

14e. – *There is a recent facilities plan covering future needs, improvements, and additions. Building maintenance and improvement have historically been in response to reported need.*

- The Committee noted, in speaking with staff, that communication around who/what the expansion is for has been received as somewhat amorphous. As it is not designed to necessarily accommodate additional enrollment, there are different understandings around the ultimate objective and how that objective aligns with the strategic direction of Cotting.

*Documenting and tracking facility planning is an ongoing effort.*

- The system used to track facility maintenance and needs is done outside of a formal system, via email.

14f) *Cotting began its Capital Campaign with a “quiet phase” in January of 2018. As of October 2018, 6.18 million was raised.*

- The “quiet phase” resulted in raising more than 50% of the funds needed in less than one year.

14g. – *The school has an institutional technology plan that provides for the coordination of academic and administrative functions, defines the technological services available, projects needs and directions, and describes the management system.*

- In spite of the self study noting an “institutional technology plan”, there was no evidence of a formal, written plan that could be produced upon request. The technology staff noted that there is not a written plan for either institutional, nor educational technology. However, they do maintain a hardware inventory and planned replacement from an obsolescence timeline. They have begun to review and compare which applications were purchased, and which are actually used in order to fine tune the menu from which they disseminate each year. Google classroom application use is decided at the teacher-level. Cotting has begun to offer training around the Google Suite and potential application with the back office operations. Every classroom has a standardized technology set up (hardware, software, applications available to the teacher, smart board, laptop, etc.). Instagram has been relayed as a valuable tool, however application as a communication tool is teacher-dependent. They are currently “maintaining” their existing technology, but do not have a plan in place for strategic organization and growth in this area.

- There is not a use of data for decision-making and program structure garnered from the tracking of students post-graduation.

## Conclusions and Explanation of Rating

While Cotting rated themselves an "SM2", the Visiting Committee felt confident that the resources and commitment to infrastructure, and all this entails, evidences that Cotting has a "clear understanding, effective implementation and thorough planning for further improvement" in this area. As such, we felt that the standard was met at the level of SM1, and applaud the Cotting leadership team for their thoughtful work in this area.

## Commendations

1. Cotting has successfully prioritized a barrier-free facility in the creation of a welcoming and accessible facility. As a result, the students are relaxed and move unencumbered within their own abilities.
2. The fact that Cotting could raise such a substantial amount of their target Capital Campaign is a true testament to their ability to drive home the importance of their mission and the passion they exude for the work done on behalf of their students.
3. The Visiting Committee was consistently impressed with the level of cleanliness and organization in all areas of the facilities, from the cafeteria to restrooms, and hallways to classrooms.
4. Cotting is proactively owning the need to meet a changing population, and are actively pursuing OSD Rate Reconstruction as a result.

## Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that Cotting consider formalizing a system for the tracking of facility improvement, maintenance needs and facility requests to allow for identification of trends, planning for future capital needs, and responsiveness to staff requests for resources.

## Recommendation 2

The Visiting Committee recommends the creation of a formal, written institutional technology plan that provides for the coordination of academic and administrative functions, defines the technological services available, projects needs and directions, describes the management system, and communicates Cotting policies for technology use by students and staff. This document should be shared widely with faculty, and updated regularly to reflect the evolving needs of the school.

## Recommendation 3

The Visiting Committee recommends that the planning and implementation of the budgeting and projection process be more structured. For example, that each program leader has a role and voice in the development of the annual budget development as it pertains to their anticipated program needs. This not only creates inherent engagement and ownership of the relevant line items, it presents an opportunity to be forward thinking in planning for upcoming resource needs. This approach could also include using the next strategic plan as an opportunity for Cotting to include a well-communicated plan for deliberate reduction of dependence on the endowment income as a budget-balancing resource, and that this plan is managed through regularly scheduled, rather than "as needed", meetings directly between the CEO and CFO. This will create a deliberate avenue for the two roles to communicate regularly around finances outside of preparation for audit, board and finance meetings.

## **Recommendation 4**

The Committee recommends the implementation of a tracking mechanism for reviewing data post-graduation, in the fashion that HOPEHouse does, in order to inform how programming is meeting long-term needs of students once they leave Cotting, and to make adjustments accordingly.

# Standard 15: The Accreditation Process

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## Standard

The school is fully committed to institutional improvement and to the process of accreditation. The school completed an inclusive Self-Study, conducted in a spirit of full disclosure and following Association guidelines; responds to Commission recommendations and the requirement to meet all Standards; and participates fully in the peer review process, hosting a Visiting Committee and sending personnel to serve on Visiting Committees to other institutions.

## Visiting Team's Assessment

**Standard Met (SM1, SM2):** The students' experience is supported.

**Standard Unmet (SU1, SU2):** The students' experience is compromised.

SM1. Standard Met: Evidences clear understanding, effective implementation and thorough planning for further improvement.

## Narrative Summary

**Brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to this standard. Text copied from the school's *Self-Study Report* is in italics.**

There is no question but that Cotting School has harnessed the self-study process to energize school improvement. Part II of the study is thorough and collaborative.

The five major areas of growth that Cotting identified resonated with the Visiting Committee as we analyzed both the self-study report and our observations of life at Cotting during our visit. The senior administration has been candid about the need to work on these areas in order to ensure Cotting's continued excellence. In fact, the administration has not waited idly for the Visiting Committee but has rather already begun work to address concerns.

## Observations

Cotting created a visual representation of its core school improvement work. The visual is instructive as it places student outcomes at the center of its universe. This is consistent with the Cotting School that the Visiting Committee observed and learned to appreciate. The other major topics in Part II also revolve around "student outcomes" in the realms of diversity, communication, behavior, transition, and intensive programming. Why engage in diversity training as a school? Cotting's answer is that it is worth doing if it will help students. Is communication within Cotting strong enough? Cotting's answer is that the only way to assess that question is to examine the impact of communication systems on student outcomes.



## **Conclusions and Explanation of Rating**

The Visiting Committee offered an SM1 rating, whereas the school ranked itself at SM2 for the Accreditation Process. The Visiting Committee felt that Cotting exhibited a keen understanding of the value of the process, utilized the experience to engage the entire community in self-study, generated significant recommendations for almost all standards, gave staff opportunity to respond to the self-study prior to engaging in Part II work, and harnessed the power of the overall experience of self-study to generate important goals for school improvement.

## **Commendations**

The self-study is comprehensive, and many voices and opinions were incorporated into the process. Additionally, the school surveyed faculty, staff, parents, students, trustees, and local education agencies to better understand the school's growth opportunities. In our conversations throughout our visit, it was evident that members of the community were involved and knowledgeable about the self-study process.

## **Recommendation 1**

The Visiting Committee recommends that the self-study serve as a catalyst for continued school improvement.

## **Recommendation 2**

The Visiting Committee supports the school's insight that the emergence of more intensive program warrants some additional deep, collective thinking. While the intensive classrooms are among the most impressive facets of the Cotting program, the demands of an increased number of these classrooms places on Cotting resources and personnel merit analysis.

# Self-Study Part II: Reflection, Recommendations, and Issues for Further Discussion

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## Self-Study Part II

Part II asks the school to draw together what it has learned from its Self-Study and prioritize these ideas into a thoughtful, reflective, creative summary of the school's most significant concerns, hopes, and dreams for the future. This may include both action items and discussion items.

## Overview

Descriptive paragraphs which accurately describe the school's findings may be taken directly from the *Self-Study Report* and are in italics.

*Cotting School is committed to the accreditation process and school improvement. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) approves Cotting School's program. This includes an annual review by the DESE. A deliberate decision was made to seek re-accreditation through the New England Association of Schools and Colleges as a tool in the process of school improvement. The process of our Self-Study was built into our existing meeting structures to allow for full, long-term participation on the part of many. Cotting School has committed to the reciprocal nature of the accreditation process, as evidenced by our eleven active evaluators currently registered with NEASC. The School has also made clear the opportunity for other faculty and staff members to serve on visiting committees in the future.*

*Cotting School was able to integrate the Self-Study process into existing structures for collaboration and program development. This allowed for wider participation and created a clear system of communicating about the progress of the Self-Study. The process was made open to all employees. Our faculty and staff have been enthusiastic about the process and the positive change it will bring. Another strength of the School was its commitment to careful reflection and active school improvement.*

## Conclusions

Cotting has created a visual representation of its core school improvement work. The visual is instructive as it places student outcomes at the center of its universe. This is consistent with the Cotting School that Visiting Committee observed and learned to appreciate. The other major topics in Part II also revolve around "student outcomes" in the realms of diversity, communication, behavior, transition, and intensive programming. Why engage in diversity training as a school? Cotting's answer is that it is worth doing if it will help students. Is communication within Cotting strong enough? Cotting's answer is that the only way to assess that question is to examine the impact of communication systems on student outcomes.

## Commendations

1. The self-study is comprehensive, and many voices and opinions were incorporated into the process. Additionally, the school surveyed faculty, staff, parents, students, trustees, and local education agencies to better understand the school's growth opportunities. In our conversations throughout our visit, it was evident that members of the community were involved and knowledgeable about the self-study process.

2. Cotting's self-study process allowed for readers (faculty and staff) to comment on any feature of Part I that caught their attention. These responses helped guide the formation of Part II.
3. Reflections and Recommendations in Part II are conscientious and responsive.
4. Part II should serve Cotting well as it continues its practice of continual improvement.

## **Recommendation 1**

Responses to Part I from faculty and staff provided a detailed roadmap for recommendations regarding Part II Reflections. The Visiting Committee recommends that the school follow the roadmap provided by faculty and staff to engage in continued improvement. Comments included thoughts on consistency with health and safety (feeding, support on field trips, restroom use, behavioral supports at HOPEHouse), general behavioral supports, assessment for the quality of service programming for individual students, lack of diversity in many aspects of the school, further development of transition and vocational skill programs, solidifying staff orientation, and greater parent input.

## **Recommendation 2**

The Visiting Committee supports the school's insight that the emergence of more intensive student programs warrant some additional deep, collective thinking. While the intensive classrooms are among the most impressive facets of the Cotting program, the demands of an increased number of these classrooms places on Cotting resources and personnel merit analysis.

## **Recommendation 3**

The Visiting Committee supports Cotting's notion that it can become a more diverse and inclusive community in terms of socio-economics, race, ethnicity, and culture. The school recognizes that "going to the mailbox" to see who has been referred to Cotting will likely not bring much diversity of this description. The school recognizes that it must work in communities where the school's services are less well known, and that a significant degree of education is necessary with districts and parents to explain the services provided by Cotting and the process to gain funding. The Visiting Committee suggests that a joint task force (board, administration, staff) on diversity, equity, and inclusion might move this initiative forward effectively.

## **Recommendation 4**

The Committee recommends that Cotting School utilize the work that it has done in self-reflection as an impetus for creating an actionable strategic long range plan (a process in which the school is currently engaged).

# Major Commendations and Recommendations

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## Major Commendations

1. Cotting's mission is so compelling, so evident, so pervasive, so understood. The warmth of this dynamic community is immediately apparent. The deep expertise of the staff is obvious from the first moment one enters the school's lobby. Faculty deliver attention to each child with such a caring, unwavering commitment to the success of each student. Parents refer to a "spirit" and a competence at Cotting that so far exceeds their experiences in other programs. Watching Cotting wake up in the morning as students arrive at school is a potent experience that fortifies ones amazement at what Cotting accomplishes. Cotting School is a truly significant institution that has a powerful reason to exist for its own students and as a model of what is educationally possible for students with significant and complex special needs.
2. "Welcome to Cotting" is a phrase that means many things. To be sure, one interpretation of this simple greeting attests to the warm environment into which every student is welcomed. The expression is also used as a nuance to denote that Cotting strives to be flexible by the minute, inventive and creative at all times, responsive to a student's needs no matter what they may be. On occasion when the committee was surprised by a perceived inconsistency within the program, the response might be "Welcome to Cotting." Cotting staff understand that there needs to be a spontaneity, a nimbleness, to its operations and management. At Cotting, much happens on "as needed" basis with a truly flexible, creative, and differentiated response.
3. Cotting School has developed a model of integrated services (or comprehensive programming) according to the needs of each student. This has been a significant evolution since the last self-study. A child's physical, medical, communication, academic, social-emotional, and technological requirements can all be met during the school day at Cotting. The model continues to find ways to improve communication and service delivery among different departments within the school. The beneficiaries are the students who express their appreciation that they are safe and cared for, their parents don't have to worry about them when they are at school, and they are happy and benefiting as Cotting students.
4. For current parents and guardians, Cotting is a life-saver for their child and their families because the culture assumes that each child has definable (and often undiscovered) capabilities. They easily describe the unparalleled value proposition of this school. This is a school that seems to be "Disneyland" for children who often have been disregarded, underchallenged, and excluded from access to quality education. Parents herald the social engagement that their children experience in classrooms, lunch, after school programs, Friday night basketball games, social events, and friendships. Parents remark that the academics, paired with a high level of psychological support, at Cotting are appropriately challenging for their children, which is another major differentiator from other programs. Finally, parents are amazed that Cotting is constantly offering more services and more sophisticated interventions to help their children (this, too, is in sharp contrast to their experiences in other educational settings). They comment that the capacity of the school to meet their child's needs is extremely deep.

## Major Recommendation 1

The Visiting Committee recommends that Cotting explore additional mechanisms for pursuit of its ideal: "the highest level of achievement that all of their skills allow." What is meant by "the highest level of achievement that all of their skills allow?" How is this determined? What metrics are in place? Does the IEP process provide enough detail, is it dynamic enough to support this? How does programming change as students change? Does a program adjustment require calling an IEP team meeting? How is the richness of teacher knowledge incorporated into a student's plan?

Cotting relies heavily on the individual educational plan (IEP) process to establish the basis for each child's program, service delivery, communication with parents, and outcomes measurement. The IEP process is integral to the special education system in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and, as a result, will continue to be a foundational component of the Cotting program. Likewise, Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is the traditional way that student progress is monitored statewide; the MCAS is not capable of capturing the progress that most Cotting students make.

The Visiting Committee wonders whether Cotting should explore developing its own assessment tools to monitor and track student progress. It is possible that the progress monitoring required in the IEP system is not sufficient to describe the gains that Cotting students make on a daily/weekly/monthly basis. Such progress monitoring is already happening in more traditional and quantifiable areas such as literacy acquisition and math skill development. Perhaps Cotting would develop a student progress tracking system in the more complex and abstract areas such as social-emotional, availability for learning, growth in access to learning, gains in independence, and functional skill development. It is conceivable that IEP process doesn't do enough progress monitoring and, in fact, might serve as a disincentive for Cotting to establish its own outcome measurement system. Looking at systems that would enable Cotting to monitor progress more specifically could be a significant value-added component of the program. These tools could become important to many stakeholders, such as parents and sending school districts, thus making the value added of the Cotting experience visible outside of the Cotting community as well.

## **Major Recommendation 2**

The Visiting Committee believes that Cotting has knowledge and skills that need to be shared more broadly with the larger community. The establishment of Cotting Consulting appears to be a strong step in this direction. We understand the importance of enrollment at full capacity, and we do see opportunities to expand Cotting's impact on school districts, educators, families, and students. This, in turn, could increase Cotting's exposure, enhance reputation, feed the admission stream, and provide additional revenue. The business model could include exportation of professional training, products, consultation, evaluation services, and in-classroom support to school districts and parents. For example, Cotting's use of assistive technology is extraordinary and could be a component of an expanding service.

## **Major Recommendation 3**

Throughout the school, the Visiting Committee observed the intentional and delicate balance between empowering individual staff members to operate according to their best judgment and constructing more uniform methods of operation. We appreciate Cotting's ability to live with this precarious balance and, yet, we recommend an examination of the inconsistency that is inherent in such an approach. An example of this disparity is how teachers communicate with parents. Parents confirmed that there is variability in communication as their child moves from grade to grade and teacher to teacher, that some classroom teachers maintain Instagram communications with their class communities and others do not, and that they were surprised to hear from each other about the substantial differences in communication frequencies. In general, parents felt that Cotting knows "a lot more about our kids than they share with us in standard reporting. In order to learn more, we have to ask." Standard 13 on Communications highlights other salient examples of inconsistencies with the school.

## **Major Recommendation 4**

The Visiting Committee recommends that Cotting School undertake a comprehensive risk management study at the governance and administrative levels. Perhaps because nearly 100% of the school's energy and attention is devoted to the students, it is possible that some analysis of factors that protect the institution itself have not received enough notice. In many conversations with staff members, it became apparent that there is uneven understanding regarding employment practices. We cite a few examples: lack of clarity among staff about how compensation is determined; inconsistent approaches to evaluation, potential grievances, and termination;

procedures that protect the school when an employee leaves the Cotting community (e.g. removal from access to technology, email, and data); and protection of, and access to, student and personnel information (such as utilizing google doc for confidential information).

## **Major Recommendation 5**

Cotting School is blessed with incredibly effective, passionate, long-term leadership. The Visiting Committee encourages the school, alongside of its strategic plan, to ponder succession planning for the board and the leadership team. This might include a delineation of the precise responsibilities for each member of the senior administration, leadership development, and strategic succession plans.

# Ratings Table

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## Ratings Table

For each applicable Standard, please:

1. Enter the school's self-rating and the Visiting Committee's rating in the first two columns.
2. Enter an X in the column for "Unmet Rating?" if the Visiting Committee's rating is an SU1 or SU2.
3. Enter an X in "Differing Rating" if the Visiting Committee's rating differs from the school's self-rating.
4. Enter an X in the last column to indicate that you have provided evidence for an unmet or differing rating within the text of the *Visiting Committee Report*.

Skip any Standards which do not apply.

	School's Self-Rating	VC Rating	Unmet Rating?	Differing Rating?	Evidence Provided for Unmet/Differing Rating?
Standard 1: Mission	SM1	SM1			
Standard 2: Governance	SM1	SM1			
Standard 3: Enrollment	SM2	SM2			
Standard 4: Program	SM1	SM1			
Standard 5: Experience of the Students	SM1	SM1			
Standard 6: Resources to Support the Program	SM1	SM1			
Standard 7: Early Childhood Program					
Standard 8: Residential Program and/or Homestay Program	SM1	SM1			
Standard 9: Faculty	SM2	SM2			
Standard 10: Administration	SM1	SM1			
Standard 11: Evaluation and Assessment	SM2	SM2			
Standard 12: Health and Safety	SM2	SM2			
Standard 13: Communication	SM2	SM2			
Standard 14: Infrastructure	SM2	SM1		X	X
Standard 15: The Accreditation Process	SM2	SM1		X	X