

THE HISTORY OF *THE FORUM*

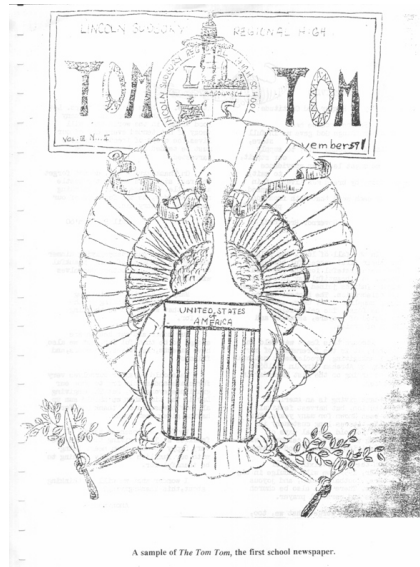
(In Historical Perspective)

The Lincoln-Sudbury Regional School District was created in 1954, despite the determined resistance of some townies, and the school opened in 1956. It was a fairly conventional school back then in terms of offerings and requirements. But there were two things that made it different from the start. First, it was a small school, so teachers and students got to know each other fairly well. The size of the school facilitated a sense of community. Second: the original school committee insisted on personally interviewing each faculty candidate, and they were looking for bright, interesting people, even if they were a bit eccentric. Maybe *especially* if they were eccentric.

Academics were emphasized, albeit in a very conventional way of understanding what “academics” meant. There was also a dress code and study halls to round things out. Back then there were few if any electives. The school committee had a vision that L-S should be a *public private* school, which is why from the get-go the school had a soccer team but no football team. Only in private schools back then did the kids play soccer. The school committee didn’t want a thoughtless rah-rah sports spirit at L-S.

The first newspaper at Lincoln-Sudbury was called the *Tom -Tom*, a name that fit nicely with the school sports “mascot,” the Warriors. Both terms were allusions to Native Americans though in a stereotypical way that kind of assumed Native Americans were long gone. (In 1988, after a ten year debate, Lincoln-Sudbury became perhaps the first Massachusetts high school to drop the Native American imagery and any symbolic connection to American Indians). Choosing to have Indian names was an amazing act of cultural appropriation—and to use a term from my tribe, the Jews, pure *chutzpah*—given the fact that that it was in Sudbury that New England Native Americans lost the key battle to preserve their ancestral lands. This happened right on Water Row in 1676, the very place where our sports teams used to train with their Indian mascot athletic garb.

According to a history of L-S written by students in 1994, *A Different Kind of Place*, the *Tom-Tom* expressed the conventionality of the school’s early years and of that time period. There were a lot of articles about fashion, a gossip column, activity reminders and lots of names and puzzles for students to work on. By the way, it was mainly a mimeographed affair. It looked like this:



In 1968, the school underwent a philosophical and pedagogical revolution, inspired by the turbulent, utopian, idealistic 1960s. The school new superintendent, Will Rullifson, basically threw open the windows, let some fresh air in, and suddenly L-S became a progressive public school: electives, free time, METCO, and experiential learning were in; dress codes and study halls were out. Teachers and students developed close relationships, sometimes in class and sometimes in innovative programs like Nimbus that organized winter camping trips that might last as long as a week. There were other experimental programs as well, such as Alternate Semester and LS West. LS grew larger, reaching its largest population in 1973.

Out of this educational ferment came a new newspaper called *The Promethean*, whose run lasted from around 1969 to 1994. There is no simple way to characterize the *Promethean*. Let's say it was wildly streaky. There were years when it appeared regularly and years when its publication was spotty. Sometimes it looked very professional despite the limited, pre-computer technology then available, and sometimes- well, not-so much. (L-S only got computers in the mid 80s, and the hardware/software were much more limited than now. In the last 30 years newspaper technology has made a 1000 years of progress. It has zero to do with the technology I saw and used as student journalist in the early 1960s). The *Promethean* at its best was excellent, interesting, even provocative and courageous. But it depended a lot on the staff and the advisor, and staffs had great challenges. They never had their own office and were moved around the school like Gypsies to whatever small space was available that year. Some years the staff was very small.



The Promethean during a good year.

In 1994, the administration launched a reform initiative called L-S 21 (for 21st century). The faculty was quite suspicious of the effort because until that time all the energy for new ideas had come up through the faculty, from the grassroots. It's hard to say what of lasting value came about through LS 21, though tons of time were poured into it. I guess a few things. One of sub-committees that I chaired dealt with "Civic Education." By this time the *Promethean* had largely fallen apart and its adviser had left. As an old student journalist I applied to be the new adviser and as sub-committee chair I argued that the civic life of the school could be invigorated by the creation of a new student newspaper, with its own office and the required computer technology. To my amazement, my argument was accepted and welcomed by then-superintendent, Matt King.

When the students and I held meetings to launch the *Forum*, there was high energy and a feeling we should make a fresh start with a new name. We actually had a lot of problems coming up with a name. In the early '90s, the US Supreme Court had narrowed high school student press rights in the *Hazelwood* Decision. Fortunately, our state legislature was one of four that replaced federal protections with state ones. That made us feel a lot safer, but we decided to double-down. In the *Hazelwood* Case, the Supreme Court stated that more protection was available to school papers that functioned as a "forum" for different points of view. So it seemed to us that calling the paper "*The Forum*" made it undeniable that we were in fact aspiring to be a protected forum. In the 14 years that I was the Forum adviser, I saw the paper develop in to a prize-winning publication all because of the incredible dedication of our student journalists. And to boot, they had some really crummy and glitchy software to work with. Still, they made great progress both in terms of form and content, and went from 8-page to 20 or 24 page issues. We went to color for the first time. Basically, we had to figure everything out. There was no model for us, and, as the present staff I'm sure knows, there is always something can go wrong,

problems you didn't even know existed until they popped up. There are a million and one snares in a newspaper office

So this is the basic chronology of the story. But there is another aspect to the history of student free speech and press at L-S, and it's even more important. Whether that history continues is really up to you. Put simply, at least from the late 60s on, student free speech and press rights have been respected and highly valued at the school. And with one exception during my years (1973-2008), the school's administrators could be counted on to protect them. I don't recall any administrator "approving" an issue before it could go to press. This is very different than in most schools. (The one exception came in the early 70s when superintendent Dave Levington—otherwise a good guy—had an entire issue literally dumped before it could be distributed. I guess he went the censorship route because that issue reported on a possibly illegal meeting that violated the state's Open Meeting law).

The *Forum* only had one brush with threatened censorship during my time. In 2007 a student was brutally murdered at the school. I really can't express to you how deeply this tragedy traumatized students and staff. The murder was on a Thursday or Friday, and the *Forum* staff instinctively wheeled into action, and prepared to put out a special 20-page issue by the time students returned on Monday. Nothing like this had ever been attempted. Some faculty got wind of the staff's plans and called on the superintendent (then John Ritchie) to intervene, arguing that a special issue would re-traumatize the school. The editors went to Ritchie and presented their view and politely requested/demanded their rights. To his everlasting credit, Ritchie sent out a memo to the faculty explaining what should have been obvious: that this is what a newspaper does...it reports on the news. When the issue came out, the *Forum* was widely praised for dealing with this tragedy in a thorough and sensitive manner. Yes, high school students are capable of amazing things, if they are trusted and allowed to be responsible. Besides, inconvenient for some though it may be, students do have some rights.

Student journalists must master a startling array of skills: leadership, effective writing, how to write a lead and organize a news story, layout and graphics, how to interview (Ha!- even in Brookline!), copyread, proofread, headline write, etc., etc. But all these skills mean nothing if the journalists lack commitment and courage.

Commitment is difficult because of all the competing demands for students' time as they struggle to compile a resume that will impress some college. In addition, there are social and academic demands. All this you know. But even if the requisite commitment can be mustered, there is still a requirement for courage, that is, the courage to pursue the news, beyond reporting on the latest play or sports victory. Those *Forum* editors I mentioned earlier showed real courage. We had great sports and features in the *Forum*, but I am most proud of the fact we tried to put real news on our front page. Faculty and administrators were just a little nervous when a new issue came out. Good. Just the way it should have been.

Is Lincoln-Sudbury changing? What effect has standardized testing & AP courses had on a school that aspires to inculcate a “love of learning”? Are the values of the school—and of a sound education— being subverted by the ruthless competition to get into a “good school”? Is student participation in decision-making being eroded? Are unrealistic academic demands being placed on students? Is cheating a problem? Is there enough (or any) experiential learning? In terms of school culture, does sports trump all? Are social justice activities being shortchanged? Are student padding their resumes? Is there enough experiential learning? Are race relations making progress? What is the back/Asian/gay/female experience at L-S? Is Lincoln-Sudbury becoming a less progressive school and returning to its more conventional roots?

These are some of the questions that may face LS student journalists today. Are you trying to explore them and aspire to more than technical excellence? Are you keeping it real? You have the freedom. Now, how are you going to use it? This question confronts all journalists.

The student newspaper at L-S is the only student activity licensed and protected by the Constitution. What you do is vital because without the news media we cannot have a democracy. How can citizens participate or decide for whom to vote if they don't know what is going on? Your job is nothing less than sustaining and expending democratic values among young citizens. The information that you provide empowers students. When teachers talk about Civics, they are talking about you and what you do.

Thank you for what you do and for continuing a great tradition. I hope to meet you all one day so I can thank you in person.

All the best,
Bill Schechter