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Dear Lexington School Community:

Through the years, the purpose of homework has been hotly contested and debated throughout the United States. It is a topic that often generates a fair amount of interest and debate in communities like ours, with school community members holding divergent points of view and perspectives.

Two years ago a revised homework policy was created and implemented with the primary goal of reducing stress for students. The Lexington School Committee also sought to honor our multicultural community by connecting those no-homework days to various religious holidays. The School Committee agreed to revisit the policy once it had been implemented to determine its effectiveness in achieving these goals. In the intervening two years, and despite the best of intentions, certain challenges have arisen.

Last year, the School Committee and I worked together to set goals for 2018 - 2020. One important goal was to examine current homework practices. Dr. Lyons, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and Professional Learning, chaired a Homework Committee that included educators from throughout the school system, parent representatives, and School Committee members. This group was tasked with studying the [existing policy](#) and its impacts, analyzing research on the subject, and proposing changes as needed. As the work of the Homework Committee progressed, it became clear that a recurring stumbling block to effective homework is in the implementation of the policy. Due to the complexity of dates, an Implementation Guide was created, including a 'no homework' calendar that lists dates when teachers may neither assign nor collect homework. As a result, Homework Committee members were asked first to develop proposals for revised no-homework dates that reduce stress for students, create consistency for teachers, respond to different grade level needs, and are pedagogically sound. Once that foundation is established, the Homework Committee's next step is to develop a homework toolkit of research-based best-practices for teachers grades PreK-12.

Two proposed "no-homework calendars" emerged from that work—one for PreK-5 and one for Grades 6-12. In addition, the broader Homework Policy (IKB) has been reviewed and further revisions have been made. To date, these proposed changes have been brought before both the Policy Subcommittee of the LPS School Committee and the LPS School Committee at a regularly scheduled School Committee meeting.

Throughout this process, we have asked many questions, made further suggestions, solicited feedback from LPS staff, scheduled public forums, and have set a goal of voting on the updated proposals at the September 24, 2019 School Committee meeting. The reworked [proposal for the Homework Policy \(IKB\)](#)

is now available for viewing, and the rationale for its development can be found in the “Frequently Asked Questions” document below.

The recommendation before the School Committee is to decouple the Homework Policy from religious holidays for all grade levels (for an overview of what presently exists, see current [Implementation Guide](#)) and adopt the following recommendations: (1) establish no-homework weekends, approximately monthly, for Grades 6-12 that remain consistent from year to year; (2) establish self-selected reading for pleasure by all students Grades PK-4 as their primary form of homework; (3) establish optionally assigned homework in all subject areas for Grade 5 students districtwide; and (4) establish no-homework on all weekends for all students in Grades PK-5.

The school community (students, parents/caregivers, and educators) has several opportunities to weigh in on this important discussion. Please feel free to submit your feedback via the brief survey that can be found [here](#). We will be accepting responses through September 15, 2109. You may also attend one or all of the upcoming scheduled public forums; the dates and times are listed below.

- September 4, 2019 - Public forum to discuss proposed Homework Policy revisions at 3:45 - 4:45 p.m. at Lexington Town Office, Selectmen's Meeting Room, 1625 Massachusetts Avenue
- September 10, 2019 - Public forum to discuss Homework Policy revisions at 6:00 p.m. at TBA.
- September 24, 2019 - Public forum to discuss Homework Policy revisions at 6:00 p.m. at TBA (School Committee vote on revised Homework Policy IKB).

The Lexington School Committee and I hope you will weigh in on this important conversation and make your voices heard. Wishing you and your family a wonderful, long weekend!

Sincerely,



Dr. Julie Hackett
Superintendent of Schools

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

1. *How can I make my voice heard about the proposed homework policy changes?*

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2. *Why is the homework policy being revised? What problems are we trying to solve? Is this a research based decision?*

The PK-12 Homework Committee was tasked with developing proposals that are beneficial to student learning; informative for teachers' instructional planning; and directly intended to reduce stress on students. In addition to reading and dissecting broad-ranging research on the link between homework and academic achievement, the Homework Committee also looked at the Estabrook homework pilot, which also utilized research in its decision-making process.

Currently, no single policy exists for all elementary school students, which means homework practices across elementary schools are inconsistent, leading to potential inequities. While research on the benefits of traditional homework on the academic achievement of elementary students is mixed, research on the benefits of engaged, independent reading—as is done at Estabrook—has long demonstrated a strong, positive correlation to overall academic achievement.

“Engaged reading is strongly associated with reading achievement. Students who read actively and frequently improve their comprehension of text as a consequence (Cipielewski & Stanovich, 1992). However, it is also likely that students who are capable of understanding a wide range of texts choose to read independently for their own enjoyment. This connection between engagement and achievement, measured as the ability to understand narrative and expository text, was shown in a national sample of students (Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue, 1997). At all three ages studied (9, 13, and 17 years), the more highly engaged readers showed higher achievement than the less engaged readers. The cross age comparisons were remarkable. The 13-year-old students with higher reading engagement were higher in achievement than the 17-year-old students who were less reading engaged. In other words, middle school students who were engaged in reading achieved as highly as students who were less engaged in reading but had 4 more years of schooling. As students become engaged readers, they provide

themselves with self-generated learning opportunities that are equivalent to several years of education.”¹

Furthermore, as stated in the Estabrook Mid-Cycle Progress Report, research indicates that time for young students to play and rest is invaluable to their learning as well.

Scholars and educators have long identified the value that comes from rest, unstructured play and creative, invention-driven activities at the elementary level. Social/interpersonal and planning/organization skill development, along with patience, empathy and resilience are among the areas cited as benefits to this. Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia pediatrician Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg’s research underscores the benefits of unstructured time for children. A summary of this work highlighted that “free, unstructured playtime gives kids a chance to discover their interests and tap into their creativity. It’s a crucial element for building resilience in children, an attribute they’ll need in order to become happy, productive adults.”² Play also has an impact on cognition as well. “The experience of play changes the connections of the neurons at the front end of your brain and without play experience, those neurons aren’t changed” says Dr. Sergio Pellis, a researcher at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada.³ Caprara and colleagues found that prosocial skills “such as cooperating, helping, sharing, and consoling, had a strong positive impact on later academic achievement.”⁴

Therefore, by reducing or eliminating written homework, young children will have more time to play and more time to read, two things research tells us are beneficial to both academics and the overall well-being of young children.

While the research on homework in its traditional form at the elementary levels suggests there is no definitive clear connection between homework and increased student achievement, the research is mixed at the secondary levels.

Stanford researchers found that students in high-achieving communities who spend more than two hours per night of homework experienced, “more stress, physical health problems, a lack of balance and even alienation from society.”⁵ Others suggest that by year 8 of compulsory education, no more than 60-70 minutes of homework should be given per day (Fernández-Alonso et al., 2015).⁶ In 2003, the Brown Center Report on American Education studied the homework controversy, and after examining the most reliable empirical evidence at the time, concluded that an overwhelming majority of students had an hour or less of homework each night. The Brown Center Report was updated in 2014 with similar findings. Interestingly, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) found that 17-year-olds have the most

¹ Excerpted from the chapter “Engagement and Motivation in Reading” (Guthrie & Wigfield) in *Handbook of Reading Research*, Volume III (Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Barr, 2000)

² Schwartz, K. (2013). KQED. Retrieved from: <https://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2013/02/15/how-free-play-can-define-kids-success/>

³ <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2014/08/06/336361277/scientists-say-childs-play-helps-build-a-better-brain>

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11273389>

⁵ Mollie Galloway, Jerusha Conner & Denise Pope (2013) Nonacademic Effects of Homework in Privileged, High-Performing High Schools, *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 81:4, 490-510, DOI: [10.1080/00220973.2012.745469](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.2012.745469)

⁶ [Students' Achievement and Homework Assignment Strategies](#) Rubén Fernández-Alonso, Marcos Álvarez-Díaz, Javier Suárez-Álvarez, José Muñoz (2017) *Students' Achievement and Homework Assignment Strategies*, *Frontiers in Psychology*; 8: 286. DOI: [10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00286](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00286)

bifurcated distribution of the homework burden. Students in this age group have the largest percentage of children with no homework and the largest percentage with more than two hours.

Two years ago, the LPS School Committee revised the then homework policy to include “no homework days,” for all students, and especially for middle and high school students in an effort to provide them with some much-needed relief from intense academic pressures. These dates were also linked to various religious holidays in an effort to honor our multicultural community. Despite best intentions, unintended consequences have occurred including time compression of homework as teachers work to deliver and students work to learn the same amount of content in a shorter time period; a disruption of the teaching and learning cycle as teachers need to wait to collect homework, plan instruction based on the results, and provide timely feedback to students; and the potential for religious holidays to be diminished in importance by having students who do not celebrate taking advantage of the policy.

3. ***In middle and high school, how many “no homework days” are there presently? How many “no homework days” will there be under the new proposal?***

Currently there are 14 “no homework days” for grades 6-12. Under the new proposal there will be approximately one per month, spaced out relatively evenly over the course of September through May.

4. ***What are the unintended consequences of the current policy for middle school and high school students and teachers?***

Teachers have expressed concern that it is difficult to maintain consistency in teaching and learning with a “No Homework Calendar” that is so complex it requires a detailed implementation guide. Our educators believe it would be better for students to have a consistent, monthly “no homework” schedule that they can easily anticipate. After teaching a lesson, teachers may have to wait several days to assign homework and assess student understanding with the current “no homework” schedule. Some educators report that linking the “no homework days” to religious holidays has created the need to clarify that the “no homework days” are not just a respite; they are a solemn occasion worthy of our reverence and respect. Moreover, there is a concern that a complicated “No Homework Calendar” may create unnecessary inequalities. If a teacher inadvertently misses one of the “No Homework Days” associated with a religious holiday, there is a concern that it may send the wrong message to our students and families.

5. ***If some religious holidays are recognized on the school calendar as “no school days,” won’t this be unfair to those who have school on their religious holidays?***

As much as we would like to, we cannot accommodate all religions and cultural celebrations on the annual school calendar, and currently do not in the existing policy. It is true that in addition to federally recognized holidays included on the calendar, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Good Friday also are designated as no-school days. While this inequity is important to discuss, the school calendar is a policy that is separate from the homework policy. For the reasons noted above (see question 4), the two policies taken together currently do not resolve the inequalities. Both the current and proposed homework policies allow students to request a homework reprieve from their teacher, which will be granted.

6. How does the proposed policy changes benefit students and teachers?

Our Strategic Plan includes several core values designed to support powerful teaching and learning, including providing authentic learning experiences for students; giving students a degree of control over their own learning; and bringing joy back to teaching and learning. The proposed revisions at each grade span reinforce these core values. Additionally, we trust the professional judgment of our educators. We know they will do what is best for students, and we will provide consistent support via content area coaches, curriculum specialists, department heads, as well as professional learning to help them maintain high quality homework experiences for their students.

7. Will the “no-homework policy” at Estabrook be impacted by these proposals?

In short, no. The existing policy at Estabrook will remain in place and will, in fact, be implemented universally across all elementary schools and Lexington Children’s Place (PK-4).

Also, it may be helpful to clarify a common misunderstanding about the existing homework policy at Estabrook. There *is*, in fact, homework at Estabrook; however, it involves students reading for pleasure books that they self-select, and not traditional *written* homework or worksheets. Students are expected to read nightly. When required, teachers may also assign targeted homework assignments to help students fill in gaps in their understanding. Bridge Elementary School has adopted this general approach to homework and other schools have experimented with a similar model over the years. As cited above, research supports the positive impact reading has on student achievement overall. The findings are inconclusive on the benefits of written homework on student achievement at the elementary grades.