

TO: Mary Czajkowski, Ed.D, Superintendent of Schools
Lexington School Committee

FROM: Sandra Trach, Principal, Estabrook School
Jeffrey LaBroad, Assistant Principal, Estabrook School

DATE: May 2, 2018

SUBJECT: Estabrook School Homework Pilot Update

The 2017-2018 school year marked the second of a two-year pilot in which Estabrook School students' homework focused on at-home reading as core learning outside the school day. In the second year of this pilot, Estabrook has continued to explore how this approach has shaped learning for our students both in and out of school.

BACKGROUND

As part of its 2016-2017 School Improvement Plan, Estabrook School aimed to reduce student stress while maintaining high academic achievement for all students. One implementation step in this work was piloting a shift in homework, with a focus on at-home reading as core learning outside the school day. This was paired with the creation and distribution of monthly, grade-specific At Home Learning Calendars. The work was done in accordance with the Lexington School Committee's Homework Policy (policy IKB), and in coordination of the Lexington Public Schools' evaluation of the role of homework as a part of the 2016-2017 District Improvement Plan.

The 2017-2018 School Improvement Plan provided for the continuation of this pilot. The current implementation is informed by feedback in the pilot's first year, along with the Lexington School Committee's updated homework policy (July 2017) and subsequent implementation guide (September 2017).

CONSIDERATIONS

RESEARCH ON HOMEWORK While researchers have identified the need for further study of the impact of homework on students, research that has been conducted around the effectiveness of homework in elementary-aged students has been unable to draw a correlation between assigning homework and increased student achievement.

RESEARCH ON READING Extensive research on reading draws a strong positive correlation between the quality and quantity of self-selected, independent and shared reading and overall academic achievement. Simply stated, the more a child reads (and in particular, reads texts of high interest at his/her just right level), the better reader he/she will become, and the higher level of achievement will be actualized.

RESEARCH ON WELLNESS & PLAY 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.

YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY In 2015 39% of seventh and eighth grade students indicated that homework causes "a lot" (32%) or "extreme" amounts of stress (7%). This raised questions about the potential negative impact of homework on elementary students, for whom current research suggests there is little instructional benefit.

THEORY OF ACTION

- If we support independent and shared reading of appropriate high-interest texts at home, including removing barriers preventing ample reading time, we support a culture of learners who enjoy reading.
- If we increase time spent with self-selected texts, we strengthen our students as readers and learners.
- If we reduce the use of a practice that does not have a proven value-added effect in terms of skill or knowledge development, we create time for students to engage in play and other self-directed activities alone, with family and with friends.
- If we provide ample time for recreation, rest, family commitments and the pursuit of activities of interest to students, then students' academic and social-emotional skills will grow.
- If we allow for some short term, targeted intervention and practice at home when individual student need dictates it and parents and teachers agree, all students will continue to achieve at high levels and have their individual needs met.
- If we provide resources and ideas aligned with LPS curriculum for extending learning, families will identify activities and routines that best suit their family's interests and needs.

IMPLEMENTATION

READING: Estabrook School students continue to learn outside the school day. Every afternoon and evening, students are expected to read texts of their choosing. When needed, teachers support students by providing titles for students to read at home (or assignments of pages/minutes). This largely reflects previous practice in grades K-3 in place prior to the start of the pilot.

AT HOME LEARNING CALENDARS: Each month, students receive a grade-specific calendar with an array of activities to do alone, with a friend, or with family members. The calendars are a collective effort of staff throughout the building, and often reflect what students are learning in school.

AT HOME PROJECTS: Many grades continue to offer students at-home projects to be completed together with family members. An example of this is the Kindergarten Quilt Project.

REINFORCING PRACTICE: As needed, teachers provide short term, targeted intervention practice when a student demonstrates a specific need. Such work is assigned only when agreed upon by parent and teacher. In younger grades, activities are sent home that reinforce skills learned in school.

FOSTERING DISCUSSION: Teachers have re-invested time in sharing conversation starters, talking points or questions related to work going on in school with families, or otherwise increasing the frequency of home-school communication, aimed at providing a frame within which parents can discuss and extend learning taking place in school.

COMMUNICATION

Information about Estabrook's homework plan was communicated in a variety of ways:

- **WEBSITE:** Estabrook's website features a page dedicated to its homework plan (along with information related to the Lexington School Committee's updated homework policy and homework implementation guidelines).
- **BACK TO SCHOOL NIGHT:** All teachers shared information about the reading-centered homework plan with families at our September Back to School Night. Teachers used a common slide during presentations.

- **PRINCIPAL COFFEES:** Monthly First Friday Principal Coffees featured topics related to the curriculum and how parents can extend learning beyond the school day. Formats have included presentations by content specialists and walkthroughs of the building to observe student learning.
- **LEADERSHIP TEAM:** Implementation was discussed at Estabrook Leadership Team meetings (voluntary monthly meetings including representatives from all grades and departments).
- **SCHOOL COUNCIL:** Monthly Estabrook School Council meetings provided an opportunity for the principal to update the representative body on the initiative and receive feedback.

MONITORING & EVALUATION: GUIDING QUESTIONS & DATA COLLECTIONS

Evaluation centered on five areas:

- 1) What are the self-reported impacts on family and student life outside of school?
- 2) What are the self-reported and observed impacts on students' social and emotional-well being?
- 3) How do academic outcomes compare with other LPS elementary schools (where written homework was assigned)? How do academic outcomes for Estabrook students compare with their previous academic achievement?
- 4) What impact, if any, did this change have on students' reading behaviors and interest in reading?
- 5) How might this approach to elementary homework impact student preparation for middle school homework demands?

FEEDBACK

At the current time, the execution and/or analysis of three surveys is underway:

- A **STAFF SURVEY** of all Estabrook educators

Out of 47 respondents,

- 100% reported they saw positive or no significant impact on academic performance in reading
 - 95% reported they saw positive or no significant impact on academic performance in math
 - 55% believe that their students' academic performance has improved since the beginning of this pilot; the remaining 45% believe there has been no significant change in student performance
- A **PARENT SURVEY** of parents of current Estabrook students in grades K-5
 - A **MIDDLE SCHOOL SURVEY** of all current sixth graders at Diamond Middle School

It is expected that summary findings of all three surveys will be available before the end of the school year.

NEXT STEPS

Having successfully piloted an approach to homework that focuses on strengthening students' ability to read for pleasure at home and emphasizing non-traditional approaches extending learning beyond the school day, it is recommended that Estabrook continue this model for the foreseeable future. In addition, the following next steps are suggested:

- Review, synthesize and summarize data gathered from feedback surveys from each stakeholder group.
- Gather and analyze end of year standards-based report card and MCAS data, as well as local, district and state longitudinal data since 2016.

- It is recommended that the At-Home Learning Calendars be phased out at the end of the current school year, and replaced with a new website portal that provides resources to parents about extending student learning beyond the school day.
- Continue to provide targeted practice for students beyond the school day as needed, and focus on developing positive work habits for all students during the school day.
- Explore means to most effectively communicate curricular topics and themes to families to strengthen and support successful home-school partnerships.