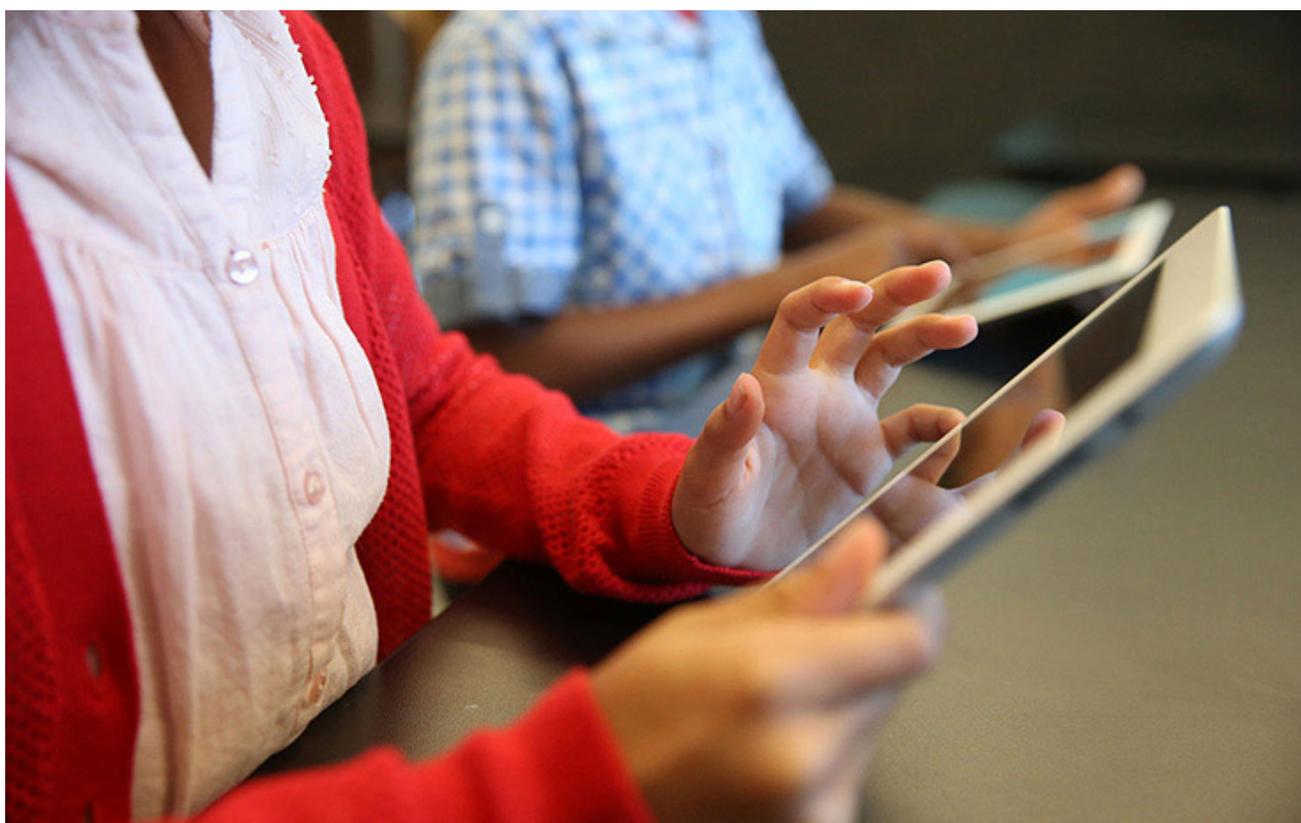

Working on Homework

A White Paper on Homework Research,
Practices and Recommendations



Sharon Public Schools

November 2016

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Sharon Public Schools Homework Task Force

As a result of the goals and expected outcomes included in the Sharon Public Schools Strategic Plan (2012-2017), a task force was created to explore two concepts:

- Home/School Communication, and
- Homework practices in Sharon and associated research.

The task force began its work during the 2014-2015 school year and first focused its work on home and school communication. One product of that first year's work is a Home and School Communication Guide, complete with all of the contact information of the district's schools, departments, and administrators. The guide also contains tips for positive, two-way communication between home and school. That guide can be found here http://www.sharon.k12.ma.us/pages/Sharon_Public_Schools/Main_Menu/General_Information.

Beginning with the 2015-2016 school year, the task force shifted its focus to the concept of homework. Specifically, the strategic plan asks for the following:

Approved guidelines are in place and available to all members of the school community that ensure appropriate quality and quantity of homework at all levels.

In order to produce guidelines that both make sense and are rooted in research, the task force needed to complete several responsibilities. In addition to surveying the district's teachers and parents to glean information about philosophies and practices, the task force also reviewed relevant research. In an effort to bring some perspective to the discussion, the task force provides both an American historical perspective on homework, as well as a more recent history of the implementation of homework in the Sharon Public Schools.

Homework Task Force Members

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This white paper concludes with the conclusions and recommendations of the Homework Task Force, and it is our hope that this document realizes a long life and provides parents and teachers the necessary guidance as requested in the strategic plan.

An American Historical Perspective on Homework

For the purposes of this document, the “history” of homework and homework practices in the Sharon Public Schools is limited to the past decade. For contextual understanding, however, it is important to articulate a brief history of homework during the previous century. While it is true that the vast majority of research articles on homework and its implementation provide an historical context dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, it is fair to say that the opinion pendulum has swung back and forth several times. At the turn of the 20th century, for example, research on homework practices linked a negative effect of homework to the healthy development of children. From there, the pendulum shifted to the beginning of the progressive movement of the 1930’s and the “no positive effect on achievement” mentality that lasted until the late 1940’s into the 1950’s (Herrig, 2011).

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In the late 1950's, American sentiment was influenced by, and possibly threatened by, the Soviet Union's successful launch of Sputnik. Thus the pendulum swung to a focus on academic excellence and fear of poor performance in comparison to other world powers. With that pendulum swing the nation's schools and school children saw an unprecedented focus on nightly homework. This lasted until the mid to late 1960's when the nation's focus shifted away from the demand for nightly homework. Then, with the release of the highly controversial, and non-research based, *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the policy makers and the nation's schools were, once again, caught up in a fear mentality that America's public school children were not performing as well as their peers in other countries.

The impact of *A Nation at Risk* on American schools lasted well into the beginning of the 21st century. At the turn of the new century, one publication among others, *The Manufactured Crisis*, by Berliner and Biddle (1996) began to break down the mistruths and faulty claims about American student inferiority in comparison to competing nations. Thus, during the first part of the 21st century the pendulum's current focus is less on what children experience after school and more on what occurs during school hours like teaching skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (P21, Partnership for 21st Century Learning at <http://www.p21.org/our-work/p21-framework>).

The prevailing theory is that everyone went to school, so everyone must know what the right conditions are to provide a high quality education for children.

Throughout history, America's public schools have functioned as a reflection of societal values. In addition, no other institution is so closely monitored and influenced by policy makers and governmental regulations as are our nation's public schools. The prevailing theory is that everyone went to school, so everyone must know what the right conditions are to provide a high quality education for children. As a result of multiple new regulations from both state and federal government, it often feels to educators that the trust in education professionals today is at an all-time low, and schools and school practices are influenced more and more by those furthest away from the actual classroom. Consequently, pedagogy and trends in schools today tend to swing like the homework pendulum has swung during the last century, back and forth, back and

forth, until it feels as if there are only two extremes as the answer to any educational question. In the information to follow, the Sharon Public Schools Homework Task Force will summarize school committee policy on homework and will present a brief evolution of events that brought us to identify homework as a topic worthy of study. The Homework Task Force will also share recent parent and teacher survey results on the topic of homework, and the task force will offer recommendations in an effort to stem the tide of the swinging pendulum and to recognize that there is value in moderation over the extremes.

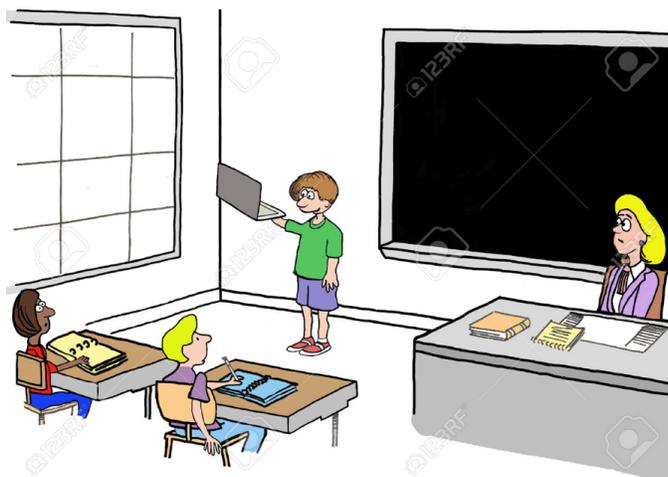
School Committee Policy

It is the policies of the Sharon School Committee that provide our school district with its direction and purpose. The policies are meant to serve as a series of expectations and guidelines for topics as varied as fiscal and facilities management, support services, instruction, students, and community relations, among others. The Committee's policies are labeled by a series of call letters beginning with "A" policies related to "Foundations and Basic Commitments" to "L" policies related to "Education Agency Relations". The school committee's policy on homework is *Policy IKB, Homework*. It reads:

The term "homework" refers to an assignment to be prepared during a period of supervised study in class or outside of class.

Homework should be designed to serve specific purposes such as to enhance the learning process, to prepare for tests or quizzes, to supplement lessons, to aid in the mastery of skills, or to create and stimulate interest on the part of the student.

Homework assignments should be consistent in terms of the amount given each day and the time required for each assignment so that a pattern of meaningful homework can be established by the teacher and/or the student.



"Oh, I did my homework, alright. I found a paradise called 'online school helper'."

Information and rubrics for any homework assignment should be clear and specific, and easily accessible to students and parents, along with deadlines for completion.

Homework assignments should take into consideration individual differences of students. Homework should not require the use of reference materials or technologies not readily available in most homes, school libraries, or the public library, and should require the use of those materials only when the student has had instruction in the use of them.

The School Committee recognizes that there are many other learning activities in the life of a student besides homework. After school activities, pursuing cultural interests, family time, and exploring personal interests should be considered by teachers when planning assignments. Homework is not to be used as a form of punishment under any circumstances. Revised: October 30, 2013.

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Background in Sharon

As referenced at the beginning of this document, the background on homework practices in the Sharon Public Schools will only go back so far as the past eight (8) to ten (10) years. The information provided in this section is mostly anecdotal as shared by teachers and building administrators.

Teachers and their principals have had discussions about homework, its purpose, its usefulness, and its impact on student achievement for generations. During the past decade in Sharon, however, the discussion reached a peak between 2009 and 2010 when noted American author and lecturer, Alfie Kohn, was invited to speak to the Sharon community. The genesis of this invitation surfaced at the Cottage Street School, and it was the Cottage Street School Council and the building administration that worked so hard to bring Mr. Kohn to Sharon.

Without question, Mr. Kohn's take on homework is such that he believes few homework practices occurring in schools today are truly impactful and positively effect student achievement. When he came to Sharon back in 2009/2010, he spoke to a fairly large audience of educators and parents in the high school auditorium. His lecture challenged many of the traditional perspectives on the use and purpose of homework, and he questioned why an educator would even consider assigning homework at the early primary levels. His lecture included bits of research and a strong focus on his personal, philosophical beliefs as they relate to schooling and parenting.

Mr. Kohn can articulate a convincing case against the use of homework. Consequently, during the weeks and months after his visit to Sharon, it was obvious to some that minor modifications in homework practice were being made in pockets around the district. Building administrators brought Mr. Kohn's message back to building-based faculty meetings and this, too, had a minor effect on modifying some teachers' homework practices. Without analyzing why, these minor effects seemed to be much more prevalent at the elementary grades with little change or modification realized at the middle or high school grade levels. In

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addition, what was painfully obvious was that whatever impact Mr. Kohn's lecture had on teachers' homework practices in Sharon, it was piecemeal rather than systemic.

Consequently, a few teachers may have modified their practice to reflect more of Mr. Kohn's thinking, and this modified behavior has had a lasting effect. More likely, however, is that Mr. Kohn's lecture had a short-lived impact on some teachers, and then these teachers' modified behaviors regressed back to the traditional "norm". Again, it appears that Mr. Kohn's impact on middle or high school teacher practice was limited at best and potentially nil.

Roll forward a few years and the district began its first-ever strategic planning process during the 2011-2012 school year. During the year-long process, the more than twenty members of the strategic planning team – including teachers with STA membership, administrators, parents, and two community members – had the opportunity to dream and articulate its vision for the Sharon Public Schools. As a result of those discussions, the strategic

“Engage parents and staff in the review of current values, practices, and purposes of homework” (SPS Strategic Plan, p. 42).

planning team decided to *“Engage parents and staff in the review of current values, practices, and purposes of homework”* (SPS Strategic Plan, p. 42) as one of its improvement goals. An associated, expected outcome was to ensure that *“Approved guidelines are in place and available to all members of the school community that ensure appropriate quality and quantity of homework at all levels”*. Based on the target timeline on page 42 of the district strategic plan, this work was to begin during the FY14 school year, with resolutions and recommendations happening in FY15 and FY16. The work of the Homework Task Force is slightly behind schedule; however, the goal is for it to be complete prior to the end of the current school year, 2016-2017.

In an effort to garner feedback on current practices and beliefs, the Homework Task Force commissioned a parent and teacher survey during the 2015-2016 school year. The full results of those surveys can be found here: http://www.sharon.k12.ma.us/pages/Sharon_Public_Schools/Main_Menu/General_Information/Special_Projects/Homework_Survey_Results_-_FY15. The questions on both surveys were meant to gather information about current practices and philosophical beliefs of both teachers and parents. While no member of the task force is trained in the best practices of survey creation, the team did its best to craft questions that were non-biased or misleading. Below is a summary of some of the more salient outcomes for both the parent and teacher surveys.



“Who needs to take a breath from doing homework?”

The Results

Elementary Parents Survey Results

(361 parents started the survey with an average response to individual questions being closer to 280 parents)

- The vast majority of elementary school parents feel homework should be less than 60 minutes per night.
- 74% of elementary parents report that they have to remind their children to do their homework.
- Over 60% of elementary parents report that they sometimes/often argue over homework.
- 90% of elementary parents report that children should be expected to do no more than 30 minutes of homework during weekends.
- 55% of elementary parents report that children should not be expected to do any homework during school vacations.
- 17% of elementary parents report that children should be expected to do no more than 30 minutes of homework during school vacations.
- 70% of elementary parents report that they believe homework is always/often valuable to their child's learning.
- 73% of elementary parents report that they believe their child's homework rarely/never appears to be busywork. 27% of elementary parents report that their child's homework always/often appears to be busywork.
- 74% of elementary parents report that they have to remind their children to do their homework, while 60% report that they "always/often/sometimes argue about homework."
- 63% of middle school parents report that they have to remind their children to do their homework, while 60% report that they "always/often/sometimes argue about homework."

- 46% of high school parents report that they have to remind their children to do their homework, while 48% report that they “always/often/sometimes argue about homework.”

Middle School Parent Survey Results

(209 parents started the survey with an average response to individual questions being closer to 182 parents)

- 57% of parents reported that their child spends 60 minutes or less on nightly homework. 43% report that their child spends 60 minutes or more on nightly homework.
- 73% of parents report that they feel their child should spend 30 minutes or less on homework during school vacations.
- 65% of parents report that they feel their child’s homework is valuable to learning.
- 65% of parents report that they feel their child’s homework is rarely/never busywork.
- 74% of parents report that they feel 60 minutes of homework or less per night is appropriate for their child’s grade level.
- 72% of parents report that they feel homework is a necessary part of their child’s education.

High School Parents Survey Results

(194 parents started the survey with an average response to individual questions being closer to 165 parents)

- 68% of parents report that their child spends 60 minutes or more on nightly homework.
- 64% of parents report that their child spends 60 minutes or more on weekend homework, while 48% report that they feel 60 minutes or more on weekend homework is appropriate.

- 57% of parents report that it would be appropriate to have no homework during school vacations with another 16% reporting that 60 minutes or less would be an appropriate amount of homework during school vacations.
- 57% of parents report that they feel their child's nightly homework is always/often valuable with another 38% reporting that they feel their child's nightly homework is sometimes valuable.
- 61% of parents report that their child's nightly homework never/rarely appears to be busywork while another 35% report that they feel their child's homework often appears to be busywork.
- 84% of parents report that 90 minutes or less of nightly homework is appropriate for their child's grade level.
- 82% of parents report that they are rarely/never notified if their child requires additional home support with nightly homework.

Teacher Survey Results

(110 teachers started the survey with an average response to individual questions being closer to 102 teachers)

- Elementary teachers responding to the survey = 31% of the total
- Middle school teachers responding to the survey = 23% of the total
- High school teachers responding to the survey = 46% of the total
- 59% of the teachers completing the survey report 11 or more years teaching experience.
- 22% of all teachers responding to the survey (11% at the high school level) report that they do not assign nightly homework.
- 78% of teachers (38% at the high school level; 16% at the middle school level; 24% at the elementary level) report that they feel their students spend 60 minutes or less on nightly homework assigned by them.
- 62% of teachers report that they feel their students spend between 60 minutes and more than two hours on their total homework load each

night; 42% of the teachers within the 62% referenced are high school teachers.

- 49% of high school teachers report that they feel students should spend between 60 minutes and two hours on nightly homework; 11% of middle school teachers report that they feel students should spend between 60 and 90 minutes on nightly homework with 0% of teachers at any grade level reporting that they feel students should spend more than two hours on nightly homework; 68% of grades 3-5 teachers report that they feel students should spend between 30 and 60 minutes on nightly homework; 30% of grades K-2 teachers report that they feel students should spend between 30 and 60 minutes on nightly homework.
- 55% of teachers report that they feel homework practices of all teachers in their schools should be more alike than different; another 25% of teachers report that they neither agree nor disagree with that statement.
- 58% of teachers report that they feel a maximum amount of after school time to be spent on homework should be established; that sentiment was much more popular at the elementary level; it was evenly split at the middle school level; and 56% of high school teachers disagreed with the statement.

The survey results of parents and staff further remind us that there are a wide variety of opinions on homework. In drafting homework recommendations we must evaluate our practices in consideration of the research and the needs of all of our students, even if contradictory to personal beliefs or practices.

Homework Research Takeaways

As referenced earlier in this report, homework, its implementation, and its usefulness to influence student achievement have been debated for decades. Anyone with a passing interest in the existing research on homework can simply

Google the term and find hundreds of scholarly articles. For the purpose of our work within the Homework Task Force, the members of this group read ten (10) or more of the most often-referenced research articles and several additional articles from practitioners/theorists. A full accounting of these articles can be found at the end of this report. Even though this report is not a literature review on the topic, the task force provides the following facts to consider.

Facts to Consider

In a review of homework studies from 2001 and a follow-up in 2006, Professor Harris Cooper from Duke University found very little correlation between the amount of homework and achievement in elementary school children and only moderate correlation in middle school.

The positive impact of homework declines for middle school students after 90 minutes a night. For high school students, the positive line declines between 90 minutes and 2.5 hours of homework a night (Cooper, 1989; Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006).

Students in Finland do approximately three (3) hours of homework *a week* and in 2012 scored highest in the world in reading and 12th highest in math on the OECD's international test.

In a survey from 2013, teens report stress levels higher than adults and far exceeding what the teens themselves considered to be healthy (Stress in America survey conducted by Harris Interactive Inc. in 2013 on behalf of the American Psychological Association).

38% of parents with children in grades 9-12; 36% of parents of children in grades 6-8 and 22% of parents of children in grades K-5 say their child experiences a lot of stress. Homework was identified as the leading source of student stress (September 2013 Study by NPR/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health).

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) report in 2013, over 70% of teenagers get at least two hours less sleep each night than recommended.

In a 2013 study of 4317 students from ten (10) high performing high schools, 72% reported being often or always stressed over schoolwork (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

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is clear to the members of the Homework Task Force that the conversation around homework, its implementation, and its usefulness should begin anew here in the Sharon Public Schools. This very discussion is also occurring all across the state with many school districts implementing some sort of referendum, or limit, on homework practices. A few examples, include Brookline, Concord-Carlisle, Dartmouth, Dover-Sherborn, Duxbury, Manchester-Essex, Norwell, Quincy, and Weymouth among others. It is our hope that this report will help to spark discussion and influence reflection. When considering the pendulum swings of decades past, it is also the hope of the Homework Task Force that any homework guidance provided here is seen as

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moderate. It is not a goal of the task force to eliminate homework altogether. It is, however, the goal of the task force to advocate for some systematic actions that can be put in place that we feel reflect recent research and are respectful of teachers' and parents' opinions on this topic.

As such, and based on relevant research and common sense practice in our schools, the Homework Task Force endorses the following to become part of the climate and fabric of our diverse school system:

Phase One Actions

To begin with the 2016-2017 school year

Do not assign homework for homework's sake. Teachers should not feel pressure that they must assign nightly homework. If, however, assigning a reasonable nightly assignment that meets the criteria of preparing for class, providing students practice in high leverage skills, and/or addresses some other useful, research-based purpose, then assigning homework may be appropriate and supported.

Continue discussion by grade level teachers to rethink homework in the early primary grades. Research supports minimal homework, one to three weekly assignments not to exceed 10 minutes each that focus on encouraging class preparation (e.g., bringing something to show and tell), reading practice, skill review. While a complete elimination of homework assigned to improve student achievement in the early elementary grades is supported by research, research does cite some benefit of limited homework for practice on learning time management and organization skills.

At the upper elementary grade level, use the rule of thumb of assigning 10 minutes of homework for each year a child is in school. For example, a fourth grader should have no more than 40 minutes of homework per night.

Build in a level of consistency with homework assignments. Do not fluctuate between "a little" and "a lot" so that students do not know what to expect.

Continue discussion by curriculum teams, grade level teams, and schools where the merits of homework are evaluated, critiqued and/or supported. Questions to ask might include why homework is given; what kinds of homework are assigned; and what purposes do they serve? How should homework be defined for a 21st century digital world and academic setting? Should student choice be a part of the homework discussion? What should homework count with regard to its influence on a student's final term grade and/or overall standards-based assessment?

At SMS and SHS where students have multiple teachers during any given day, grade level teams and/or departments should align homework expectations for consistency sake and limit the nightly overall homework load to 90 minutes at the middle level and not more than 2.5 hours at the high school level.

When homework is conceptual such as a mathematical concept or scientific principle, limit the number of homework questions to the number that allows the students to demonstrate understanding. For example, do not assign 20 math problems if students can demonstrate their skill mastery, or not, in 10 math problems.

In an effort to live within the time during which research supports homework positively impacts student achievement, grade level teams and departments should communicate their nightly and long-term homework assignments to colleagues.

One of the greatest strengths of our community is its diversity. The diversity within our community of learners is one factor that makes our school system such an amazing place to teach and learn. Consequently, religious holidays in Sharon are to be "homework free" with no assignments due at least until the second day back in school.

Long holiday weekends in Sharon are to be "homework free" with no assignments due at least until the second day back in school.

School vacation weeks are to be “homework free” with no assignments due until at least the second day back in school and no major assignments due until at least the third day back in school.

Phase Two Actions

To begin with the 2017-2018 school year and beyond

Incorporate the action items below into the school improvement plans at each of the schools within the Sharon Public Schools.

Make use of half-day professional development days to continue discussions and to finalize next steps.

Follow through by curricular teams, grade levels, and schools, to document agreements for publication in student handbooks and in other appropriate publications.

Follow through by curricular teams, grade levels, and schools to discuss the pros and cons of grading homework for effort, completion, and/or accuracy.

Publicize a series of intermittent due dates for long-term assignments. For example, if students are assigned a lengthy and involved research paper on October 1 to be due by the end of the month, provide at least a weekly check-in with students to ensure that they are making progress along the way and not waiting until the last minute to begin their work.

At the early elementary grades, publicize for parents the types of homework assignments that build good organizational and time management skills.

Either through the Homework Task Force or through another mechanism, and during the 2017-2018 school year, survey teachers, parents, and students on the expectations endorsed in Phase One of this report. Publicize the survey outcomes to all constituencies and discuss among the Task Force if modifications are necessary.

In Summary

The work that went into researching the topic of homework, agreeing on a series of phased-in expectations, and writing this final report was beyond expectation when the task force began its work. However, after nearly two years the task force believes strongly that alignment with and following the endorsed actions within this report will provide multiple benefits to students and their families, as well as to teachers working within the Sharon Public School system. Moving forward, it is the hope of the Homework Task Force that evidence of the group's work will live in each and every classroom, each and every day. Thank you to all of the professionals within the school system for helping to create this reality, and thank you to all families within the school system for supporting the ideas and endorsed actions included in this report.

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