

## **Executive Summary**

# **Recommendations for Reducing Stress, Building Resiliency and Improving Services for Our Youth**

**Submitted by the Ad Hoc Committee for Youth At Risk  
to the Lexington School Committee**

**Lexington, MA**

**November 2014**

# I. FRAMING THE ISSUE

## 1. Stress is taking its toll on Lexington's youth

According to the 2013 Youth Risky Behavior Survey:

- 55 LHS students recently tried to commit suicide (at least once) in the past 12 months
- 247 (15% of those surveyed) seriously considered suicide – the highest level in a decade
- Harassment at school and through social media was the *strongest predictor* of suicide ideation
- 60% reported “extreme” or “a lot” of stress due to classes
- 83% of students felt the atmosphere of the school encouraged academic competition

## 2. The key is to reduce *unnecessary* stress while maintaining academic standards and a healthy balance for youth

- Not all stress is bad. The stress from challenging oneself just the right amount is a good and necessary kind of stress. But too much stress is physically and emotionally unhealthy and can lead to risky behavior.
- Some stress is simply *unnecessary* – and parents, teachers and students can do something about it. Sources of unnecessary stress include academic, extracurricular, peer, family, and social pressure.
- If students are not subjected to too much stress, particularly unnecessary stress, they will learn more, perform better, and be healthier.
- Reducing stress for students will not compromise academic standards or student achievement. Rather, having less stress can actually improve students' academic performance and success.
- Efforts to reduce student stress should also include efforts to reduce teacher/staff stress. Less stressed teachers are more effective teachers and they can model stress reduction behaviors for their students.

## 3. This is a community issue that requires leadership

- It's not just about the schools – This is a community problem requiring a community response that involves parents, students, town and the community, as well as schools.
- There must be more visible leadership and more effective organization within both the Lexington Public Schools and the Town Government to address stress and youth at risk. And there should be more coordination between the Town and LPS.
- Schools are doing a lot to serve youth with emotional issues, but Town services for youth are seriously under-resourced relative to comparable communities.
- While efforts in the schools require district-wide leadership and organization, effective solutions also require a “bottoms up” approach with heavy teacher and staff involvement.
- More effective communications to the community is needed from LPS and the Town.

**4. Enhancing social-emotional intelligence and building resiliency leads to higher quality education and better performance**

- If the emotional intelligence of students is enhanced, through programs such as those based on Social Emotional Learning, they will be more successful.

**5. It is critical to improve identification of youth at risk and provide support services for them and their families**

- When youth and their families are experiencing problems, they should have access to quality services.

**6. Changing the culture and climate for youth requires building awareness and engaging in community discussion and education**

- Coming together can make a difference. Other communities have successfully brought town services, schools, parents, and community groups together to address stress, e.g. Newton, Needham, Bedford, and Winchester.

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The Full Report of the Ad Hoc Committee for Youth At Risk can be found at the Lexington School Committee website <http://lps.lexingtonma.org>. Go to School Committee/Publications and Reports

## II. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Leadership and Organization

a) Designate senior leaders in both the Lexington Public Schools and town government to manage programs to reduce stress, build resiliency, and provide services for youth at risk.

b) Establish collaborative working groups within the LPS system and between the schools and town government, as well as a town-wide working group comprised of community leaders, to develop a coordinated approach.

Schools	Town Government	Community*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Hire or designate a <b>senior LPS administrator</b> with the organizational authority to mobilize initiatives in the classroom, guidance, social services, and Professional Learning in order to lead district-wide efforts to build youth resiliency, reduce youth stress, and provide services for youth at risk</li> <li>▪ Create a district-wide <b>Stress Reduction and Resiliency Working Group</b>, chaired by the senior LPS administrator that includes administrators, principals, guidance, wellness, special education staff, and classroom teachers, to develop new initiatives in the schools, share information among schools about their programs, and assess the effectiveness of these efforts</li> <li>▪ Form an <b>on-site working group within each school</b> chaired by the principal or assistant principal to find ways to reduce stress, build resiliency, and improve the school climate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Hire or designate a <b>Director of Youth Services</b> within the Department of Human Services responsible for overseeing and coordinating services to youth</li> <li>▪ Create a <b>Committee for Lexington Youth</b>, co-chaired by the Director of Youth Services and designated LPS lead administrator and comprised of youth, school, town, and community leaders, to promote and develop programs aimed at building resiliency, reducing stress, and providing counseling and support services to youth at risk</li> <li>▪ Hire counseling staff or contract with a community counseling agency to assist the Director in providing <b>counseling and support services</b>, staffing the Youth Center, and developing community education programming for youth and parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Under the auspices of the Committee for Lexington Youth Working Group, recruit leaders from community groups, such as PTA/PTO's, religious and civic organizations, and social service, and healthcare providers, to form a <b>Community Resources for Youth Working Group</b> with the aim of mobilizing community resources to build resiliency, reduce stress, and provide community-based services for youth at risk</li> <li>▪ The Community Resources for Youth Working Group would develop and organize <b>community forums, education programs, and town-wide events</b> aimed at promoting discussion and educating the community on social and emotional health, reducing stress, and supporting youth at risk</li> <li>▪ The Community Resources for Youth Working Group will act as a <b>liaison</b> in order to coordinate the community education programs and forums for youth and families offered by various community groups</li> </ul>

\* Community includes the community-at-large (parents, students, community members) as well as community organizations such as PTOs and PTAs, health service providers (social workers, physicians, mental health providers), youth counseling and prevention organizations (LYFS, Wayside), civic youth groups (Boy Scouts, Girls Scouts), faith-based youth groups (all church/temple/mosque youth groups), community-based education booster groups (FOLMADS, LEF), youth-based community not-for-profits and businesses (ArtSpan, LACS, Dance Inn), community-based organizations (Rotary, Lion), community businesses and professionals (retailers, independent professionals), and other ancillary quasi-public organizations (library, Hayden, Lexington Community Education, colleges).

## 2. Help students and youth build resiliency, enhance social-emotional intelligence, manage stress, create balance in their lives, and improve overall wellness.

Schools	Town Government	Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Expand, initiate and coordinate evidence-based <b>Social-Emotional Learning</b> programs with the aim of ensuring consistency, continuity, and alignment of SEL efforts K-12</li> <li>▪ Implement programs to teach children how to <b>manage emotions</b>, stress, anxiety, and build resiliency</li> <li>▪ Expand <b>Professional Learning</b> for teachers on how to create pro-social classrooms, and help students manage stress and build resiliency</li> <li>▪ Evaluate effectiveness of current programs and consider <b>alternative approaches</b> for reducing stress and building resiliency at all levels, e.g. morning meeting time, intervention/exploratory blocks, LHS extended homerooms</li> <li>▪ Initiate pilot programs and expand existing initiatives to integrate <b>mindfulness</b>-based stress reduction practices into all schools</li> <li>▪ Offer and expand <b>wellness program for teachers and staff</b> to reduce and manage their own stress</li> <li>▪ Reinstate <b>health education</b> in elementary schools and increase frequency of health and wellness programs in middle and high school</li> <li>▪ Develop and encourage ways to foster personal connections and <b>mentorship</b> opportunities between teachers/staff and individual students</li> <li>▪ Enable the <b>peer leadership program</b> to expand by providing additional staff resources</li> <li>▪ Increase number and access to <b>yoga classes</b> in middle and high school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Establish a <b>Youth Center</b> (possibly at the Lexington Community Center) operated by youth themselves and a Youth Center Board comprised of adults and youth to provide administration and support for the Youth Center</li> <li>▪ Provide free or low-cost access to <b>stress relieving activities</b>, such as yoga, recreation, and art, through the Town, the Community Center, the Youth Center, and other sites</li> <li>▪ Provide <b>online listings</b> of both town-sponsored and outside resources in the community for stress management, health, and wellness</li> <li>▪ Work with community and business leaders to engage youth in <b>community service programs</b> including interning and mentoring programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Organize <b>community forums and education programs</b> coordinated by the Community Resources for Youth Working Group on topics such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• social-emotional learning and building resiliency</li> <li>• mindfulness-based stress reduction approaches</li> <li>• stress-relief techniques and activities</li> <li>• role of sleep in learning and mood regulation, good sleep hygiene to improve well-being</li> <li>• how to balance academic achievement and emotional well-being</li> <li>• improving work-family balance</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Work with local business and community groups to offer <b>wellness programs</b> for parents and youth</li> <li>▪ Work with town youth services to establish community <b>peer leadership and peer mentor programs</b> for teens that complement in-school peer leadership programs</li> <li>▪ Develop a <b>parent's guide to social-emotional learning</b> and educate parents on ways to complement social-emotional learning practices from school with their children at home</li> <li>▪ Support <b>community events</b> sponsored by the town, businesses and community organizations that promote social connection, family-centered fun, relaxation, and stress-relief, e.g. Discovery Day</li> </ul>

**3. Examine ways to reduce sources of *unnecessary and unhealthy* stress for students and youth, including academic, extracurricular, social, peer, family, societal, or internal pressures.**

Schools	Town Government	Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Establish <b>best practices for homework</b> through teacher groups and PLCs, and provide Professional Learning for teachers on homework best practices</li> <li>▪ Revise district and school <b>workload policies</b> and guidelines, e.g. review workload, vacation policies, respites from homework, scheduling of multiple tests/projects</li> <li>▪ Examine and consider altering <b>LHS course offerings, levels, and sequences</b> in specific areas where alternative options would provide more appropriate choices for students, e.g. adding honors levels where needed, developmental readiness for Grade 10 AP courses, science course preparation</li> <li>▪ Offer greater <b>choice and flexibility of course options</b> in middle and high school so students can closely align classes to their ability levels and interests, e.g. electives that appeal to student interests, alternatives for required classes</li> <li>▪ Define consistent and clear <b>recommendation procedures for courses</b> in middle and high school to ensure proper placement</li> <li>▪ Examine ways the schools can assist, inform, and educate students and families in making <b>balanced choices for course selection</b>; provide information on course expectations and workload to students in advance</li> <li>▪ Teach <b>time management and executive functioning skills</b> to students in middle and high school</li> <li>▪ Explore and evaluate implementing a <b>later start time for LHS</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Create a comprehensive town <b>website for youth services</b> that includes information and resources for reducing stress and building resiliency</li> <li>▪ Work with community groups to institute <b>town-wide campaigns</b>, such as managing digital media exposure ("unplugged week"), good sleep hygiene, meeting-free and homework-free days, to reduce stress and promote in-person, social interaction</li> <li>▪ Offer <b>information on health and wellness</b> topics, e.g. alcohol and other drugs, sleep, social media through the website, social media, and written material.</li> <li>▪ Partner with schools to coordinate <b>community-wide programs</b> on bullying, dating violence, Internet safety, alcohol and other drug use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Organize <b>community forums and education programs</b>, coordinated by the Committee Resources for Youth, on sources of stress that can be minimized or avoided. Possible topics include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• peer pressures/competition</li> <li>• cyber-bullying</li> <li>• social media</li> <li>• over-scheduling</li> <li>• sleep deprivation</li> <li>• how to balance academics, activities, social life, family life</li> <li>• college application process and its role in driving student stress</li> <li>• how early student stress starts and how to prevent it</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Organize <b>parent-teen discussion</b> events to talk about sources of stress and what can be done to reduce stress in students' lives</li> <li>▪ Hold <b>peer discussion groups</b> with students in the Youth Center, religious youth groups, and other community youth groups to talk about their own sources of stress and how to reduce stress in their lives</li> <li>▪ Expand efforts to reduce teen engagement in <b>unhealthy stress coping strategies</b>, such as caffeine, alcohol, marijuana and other drug use</li> <li>▪ Support <b>community activities</b> and events aimed at reducing stress, e.g. unplugged week, meeting-free/homework-free days</li> </ul>

#### 4. Identify youth at risk, provide support services, and improve coordination of services and referrals between schools, town, and community.

Schools	Town Government	Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Enhance <b>identification and support services</b> for students with emotional and mental health concerns (anxiety, stress, depression, psychological issues) at all grade levels</li> <li>▪ Hire <b>additional guidance counselors or social workers</b> in elementary schools to provide a balance of preventive and responsive services</li> <li>▪ Create additional <b>preventive support programs</b> in middle schools and at LHS for students with anxiety, stress-related, psychological, emotional or mental health issues (apart from TLP, Alpha, and SPED) This may help offload cases that end up in SPED</li> <li>▪ Ensure <b>continuity of support services</b> as students transition in the system from one school level to the next</li> <li>▪ Develop <b>Professional Learning</b> programs and delineate protocols for identifying students who exhibit signs of stress, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, or risky behavior</li> <li>▪ Partner with the Town and community providers to identify resources for school personnel to make <b>referrals</b> and do follow-up coordination</li> <li>▪ Put <b>information stickers</b> on bathroom doors about symptoms of depression and anxiety; suggest talking to doctor, guidance counselor or help line for advice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Plan and implement a community-wide <b>youth suicide prevention program</b> developed by a task force of adults and youth representing the schools and community</li> <li>▪ Develop and implement a town <b>protocol for suicide prevention</b> and response to a youth suicide</li> <li>▪ Provide free, accessible individual and family <b>counseling and support services</b> to youth and families through a contracted community counseling agency or town youth services staff</li> <li>▪ Provide counseling and <b>support groups for at-risk youth</b> involved in alcohol and other drug abuse, harassment, bullying, dating violence, including those referred by police, schools, clergy and others</li> <li>▪ Provide <b>outreach programs</b> to at-risk youth, including peer leadership programs at the Youth Center, designed to reach out to at-risk youth and enhance self-esteem</li> <li>▪ Designate a town coordinator or a contracted community youth counseling agency to be the community resource for school personnel to make <b>referrals</b> for at-risk students</li> <li>▪ Provide an <b>online directory</b> of free and low cost mental health services and private mental health providers in the community</li> <li>▪ Develop programs through a <b>youth-run website and social media</b> to reach out to at-risk and disconnected youth and to provide information to prevent suicide, dating violence, harassment</li> <li>▪ Work with the schools and community to provide <b>prevention programs</b>, such as the Child Assault Prevention Program (CAPP), <b>to younger children</b> and parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Present results of the <b>Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)</b> to parents and the community in a public forum and publish the full report on the town and youth operated websites</li> <li>▪ Review YRBS and other <b>data</b> to identify problem areas, triggers, and risk factors for youth</li> <li>▪ Train and <b>educate adults</b> (parents, educators, service providers, youth groups) to recognize signs of excess stress, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, mental health issues, self-injurious and risky behaviors</li> <li>▪ Provide <b>peer training programs for teens</b>, coordinated with the schools, on what to do, how to get help in situations of risky or harmful behavior, e.g. signs of self-harm, suicidal behavior, drug use, anxiety</li> <li>▪ Distribute information online and in print to the community on what to do and <b>how to get help</b> in risky or harmful situations</li> <li>▪ Work to <b>de-stigmatize</b> the act of seeking counseling and support</li> <li>▪ Provide <b>parent education and support groups</b> aimed at prevention of suicide, substance abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, self-destructive behavior</li> <li>▪ Engage community groups, cultural organizations, faith-based youth groups, civic youth groups to do <b>outreach</b> for youth at risk and their families</li> <li>▪ Engage <b>mental health and medical professionals</b> in the community to advise and work with schools, clergy and town services</li> <li>▪ Solicit <b>community support</b>, including financial support, for mental health services for youth and families</li> </ul>

## 5. Community Education and Changing the Culture

a) Build awareness and ongoing discussion through parent and community education activities

b) Work together to change the culture and climate in schools, at home, and in the community in ways that help reduce stress and build resiliency

Schools	Town Government	Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Encourage <b>school leaders</b> to make reducing stress a priority in the school culture; engage teachers/staff</li> <li>▪ Improve the <b>school climate and culture</b> by identifying ways to reduce competitiveness, shift the focus more on learning rather than grades, recognizing non-academic and collective accomplishments</li> <li>▪ Reduce <b>peer-to-peer competition</b> through more collaborative learning projects and group grading</li> <li>▪ Make substantial improvements in <b>communication to parents</b> at the district and individual school level about school programs to reduce stress and build resiliency including use of websites, social media</li> <li>▪ Facilitate <b>school-home partnership</b> by establishing guidelines for parents on communication with school staff and providing workshops for staff on working with families</li> <li>▪ Encourage development of <b>student-run supports</b> for stress, e.g. peer groups, advice columns, clubs, acknowledgment of student voices</li> <li>▪ Hire <b>teachers and staff</b> to reflect the <b>diversity</b> of the student population in order to enhance opportunities for adult mentorship and guidance to students of different cultures, orientations, and backgrounds</li> <li>▪ Provide <b>Professional Learning</b> to help teachers and staff understand the diverse backgrounds of students in order to help them support the social-emotional needs of students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Continue good work towards developing <b>positive relationships</b> between youth and police, fire, and library who are seen as a resource for youth at risk</li> <li>▪ Increase visibility of <b>Town services</b> and efforts to serve youth at risk</li> <li>▪ Offer more <b>non-competitive</b> recreational sports and activities</li> <li>▪ <b>Publicize</b> public events and forums as well as resources and services available to youth</li> <li>▪ Create a <b>Teen Youth Summer Internship</b> for teens to volunteer to work with Youth Services staff and assist in planning of community forums</li> <li>▪ Increase support for coaches and <b>recreation staff</b> in their efforts to build positive relationships with at-risk youth and relieve unhealthy stress in general among teens</li> <li>▪ Establish <b>partnerships with businesses</b> and companies for job shadowing, internships, and mentoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Organize <b>community forums and education programs</b> coordinated by Community Resources for Youth on topics such as:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• open discussion on “what the community wants”</li> <li>• how to redefine success</li> <li>• societal, parental expectations and its effect on students</li> <li>• how to balance a high-achievement culture with stress on students</li> <li>• open dialog between parents and children/teens about stress</li> <li>• discuss possible solutions and actions</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Organize events such as <b>Youth Summits</b> that bring together teens, parents, town, and community to address concerns of teens and stress</li> <li>▪ Initiate <b>parenting workshops</b>, a “Parent University”, or book groups around stress and parenting topics</li> <li>▪ Utilize the resources and <b>expertise</b> of local healthcare and mental health professionals to work with schools, community, and youth groups</li> <li>▪ Encourage community youth programs, counseling programs, mental health professionals, faith-based youth groups to work together and <b>coordinate programs</b></li> <li>▪ Create a <b>family-friendly environment</b> in schools and community, e.g. inter-generational activities, improved communication, translation services</li> <li>▪ Continue and expand community efforts focusing on the social-emotional and mental health needs of the <b>diverse student population</b>, e.g. Lexington Asian Mental Health Initiative</li> </ul>

## 6. Reach out to find networking opportunities and other resources

Schools	Town Government	Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reach out to and learn from <b>other school districts</b> grappling with the same issues</li> <li>▪ Review data and <b>outcomes</b> in school systems that have instituted programs or changes</li> <li>▪ Join a <b>network of schools</b>, collaborate or partner with universities or other community programs</li> <li>▪ Look into <b>research</b> programs and findings related to stress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Hire a <b>grant writer</b> to solicit funding from SAMHSA, Massachusetts Department of Public Health, CHNA15, Foundation for Metrowest, and others.</li> <li>▪ Review efforts in <b>other towns</b> to learn how to best structure services, communication, and engagement with the community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Review accomplishments in <b>other communities</b>, e.g. Needham, Newton, Bedford, Winchester, in implementing programs to reduce stress and prevent suicide and violence</li> <li>▪ Engage <b>businesses and companies</b> to match students with mentors, shadowing opportunities</li> </ul>

## 7. Create a joint Follow-up Task Force with representatives from the schools, town, and community to monitor implementation of these recommendations and to make periodic reports on progress