

**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**

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# 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.

## 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.

### III. UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

#### Stress among Youth

Chronically high levels of stress, along with ineffective coping strategies, are well-known contributors to poor physical, mental, and social health. Of particular concern today is the rising prevalence of unhealthy stress among our youth. According to a recent national survey by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2014), teens now report feeling stressed at levels rivaling that of adults, and at levels far above what is believed to be healthy.

Some stress, if time-limited, can be helpful for boosting mental and physical performance (Carmichael, 2009), and stress is a fact of modern life for which our youth should be prepared. However, chronically high stress levels contribute to youth suicide, depression, anxiety, violence, substance abuse, poor physical health and growth, and poorer performance on tests (Lepore et al., 1997; McEwen 1998).

The increase in unhealthy stress among youth today is especially alarming in light of the growing scientific evidence showing that the brain continues to undergo critical maturation throughout adolescence into the early 20's (Giedd et al., 1999), and chronic stress can harm the developing brain in areas critical for memory formation and executive functions (e.g., decision-making, organization, impulse control), with potentially life-long implications. (Arnsten & Shansky, 2004; Evans & Schamberg, 2009; Boston, 2009).

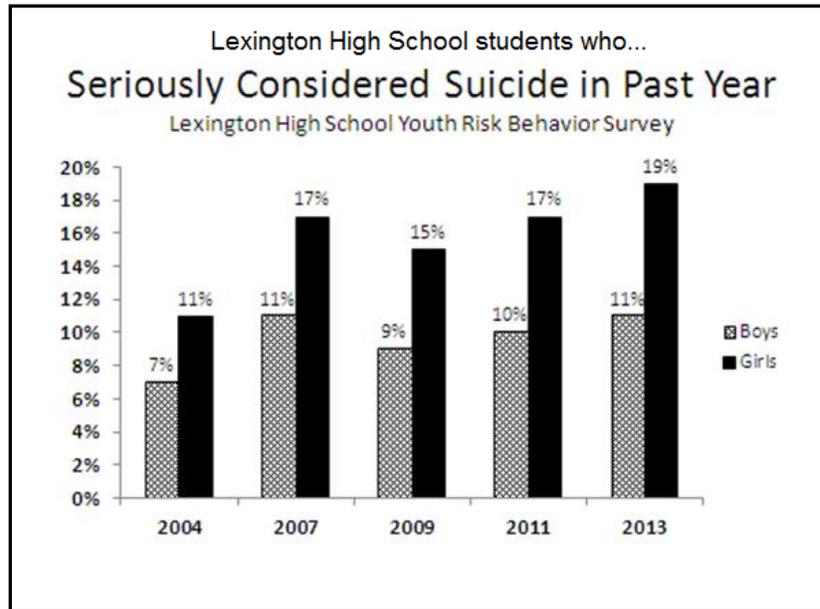
#### Our Youth in Lexington are At Risk

The situation in Lexington is no exception, as it is for many communities with high academic standards. The three recent suicides among students in Newton (Ishkanian, 2014) and the recent suicide of a 2013 LHS graduate highlight the very real danger to our youth in Lexington of community inaction and complacency around addressing this pressing problem. According to the biennial Lexington High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey:

##### 1. *Lexington students are at risk for suicide*

- A full 55 LHS students reported having attempted suicide in the past 12 months, up from 51 in 2011
- The percentage of students reporting having seriously considered attempting suicide in the past 12 months is at the highest levels in a decade (see Figure below). In 2013, about 1 in 7 (15%) students overall reported seriously considering suicide, a figure similar to the national rate (17%) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).
- The factors predicting the greatest increased risk for considering suicide among LHS students include: (a) being female, in the older grades, (b) being of Asian/South Asian ethnicity, (c) reporting higher stress related to classes and planning for the future, (d) being of sexual minority, and (e) having experienced harassment at school or related to school.

- Of particular note is that the *strongest* predictor of suicidal ideation was having been harassed in school or related to school. Having been harassed conferred a *300% increase* in the odds of considering attempting suicide, compared to an 85% increase for the next most predictive factor (being Asian/South Asian).



## 2. *Lexington students experience extreme amounts of academic stress and competition*

- The majority of students consistently report homework and academic classes among their top stressors.
  - 60% reported “extreme” or “a lot” of stress due to school
  - 96% reported stress due to homework, with 16% reporting “extreme” stress
  - 32% agreed or strongly agreed that difficulties were piling up so high that they could not overcome them
  - 35% reported they could not cope with all of the things that they have to do

These numbers illustrate how toxic and unrelenting the stress level has become for many Lexington youth.

- A consistent theme in the LHS Youth Risk Behavior Survey data is how much the culture of competitiveness in Lexington plays a role in student stress and disconnection.
  - The vast majority (83%) of students either agreed or strongly agreed that the atmosphere at LHS and in the town encourages students to compete academically with each other.
  - Over half (52%) reported that there was a lot of back-stabbing at school. Nearly 40% of students reported that bullying occurred often or very often at LHS, and 30% *disagreed* with the statements “I feel close to people at my school” and “I feel like I

am part of my school.” Experiencing such harassment was also a strong predictor of reporting higher stress related to school.

- Unfortunately, 62% of students reported feeling that the majority of teachers at LHS were unaware of their stress level.

### 3. *Stress can lead to negative coping strategies and risky behavior*

- Use of negative strategies to cope with stress is high among our youth.
  - Nearly 1 in 6 (13%) reported self-injurious behaviors in the past 12 months such as cutting, burning, or bruising
  - Over half (55%) endorsed drinking alcohol as a means to cope with stress.
  - Half reported past-30-day drinking, a rate substantially higher than the state (36%) or nation as a whole (35%) (CDC, 2014)
  - Fully one-quarter reported binge drinking (5+ drinks on a single occasion) in the past 30 days
- Exacerbating the stress and inability to cope is insufficient sleep, with 46% of students reporting getting an average of 6 or fewer hours of sleep on school nights, while the National Sleep Foundation recommends 8.5-9.5 hours for growing teens.
- When youth are exhausted and stressed, they are also more likely to be tempted to engage in dishonest academic behaviors. In 2013, 80% of students reported having copied other students’ homework and papers, 31% having used electronic devices to cheat, and 35% having cut and pasted materials from the Internet without proper attribution.

### **Stress is Affecting Younger Children**

Stress has a negative impact not just on teens, but it affects younger children as well. The principals and staff in our Lexington elementary schools are seeing an increase in the number of young children who are experiencing anxiety. The pressures upon children can start early in some cases, including over-scheduling, pressures to excel in academics and extracurricular activities, outside tutoring, academic or enrichment programs, high expectations, and the quest for perfection. Some children show signs of stress-related difficulties, such as school avoidance or changes in behavior, while others internalize the feelings. The schools also have children with other emotional, psychological or behavioral issues who need intervention and support. Oftentimes, children who show signs of emotional issues in elementary school, later have more serious problems when they reach high school.

Therefore, it is vital to recognize that stress can affect younger children, and that efforts to prevent stress-related concerns, as well as efforts to build resiliency and social-emotional intelligence, must start early.

## IV. WHO WE ARE

### The Ad Hoc Committee for Youth At Risk

In 2013, the Lexington School Committee formed the Ad Hoc Committee for Youth At Risk to address concerns regarding Lexington youth aged 3 to 22 whose mental or physical health is at risk because of unhealthy stress originating from physical, emotional, social, cultural, and academic sources that may adversely affect them and their families. Members of the School Committee elected to create the Ad Hoc Committee because of its own concern for the effects of stress on students, as well as its acknowledgment of concerns expressed by the community. The Ad Hoc Committee for Youth at Risk was charged by the School Committee “with recommending policies, goals and programs to address the issue of youth at risk due to stress”.

When the School Committee established the Ad Hoc Committee, it noted that this is a community issue that transcends the schools and which requires a collaborative response by the community as a whole. Therefore, the Ad Hoc Committee was constituted to include representatives from not

<b>Ad Hoc Committee for Youth At Risk</b>	
<p><u>Members</u></p> <p>Laurie Atwater                      William Blout, <i>co-chair</i>                      Katie Boudreau                      Linda Chase                      Constance Counts                      Tammy Darling                      Adam Goldberg                      Sion Kim Harris                      Eileen Jay                      Serena Luo                      Alana Martel                      Ann Redmon                      BJ Rudman, <i>co-chair</i>                      Valerie Viscosi</p>	<p><u>Representing</u></p> <p>Business                      Therapists                      Teachers                      School Administration                      Community Programs                      Teachers                      School Principals                      Parents                      Parents                      Students                      Students                      Community Groups                      Community Groups                      School Administration</p>
<p><u>Liaisons</u></p> <p>Alessandro Alessandrini                      Margaret Coppe                      Tessa Riley Clare                      Kathleen Cardona                      Bettina McGimsey</p>	<p>School Committee                      School Committee                      School Guidance                      PTO                      PTO</p>

only the Lexington Public Schools (administration, teachers, principals), but also from a Lexington community-based program serving youth at risk, concerned community groups, parents of Lexington students, Lexington students, a Lexington-based therapist, and a community business leader, as well as liaisons from the School Committee and School Guidance. Other parties who were invited but did not participate included liaisons from the Youth Services Council, the Lexington Human Services Department, the Human Services Committee, the Lexington Health Department, the Lexington Police Department, the Town Recreation Department, and the Board of Selectmen.

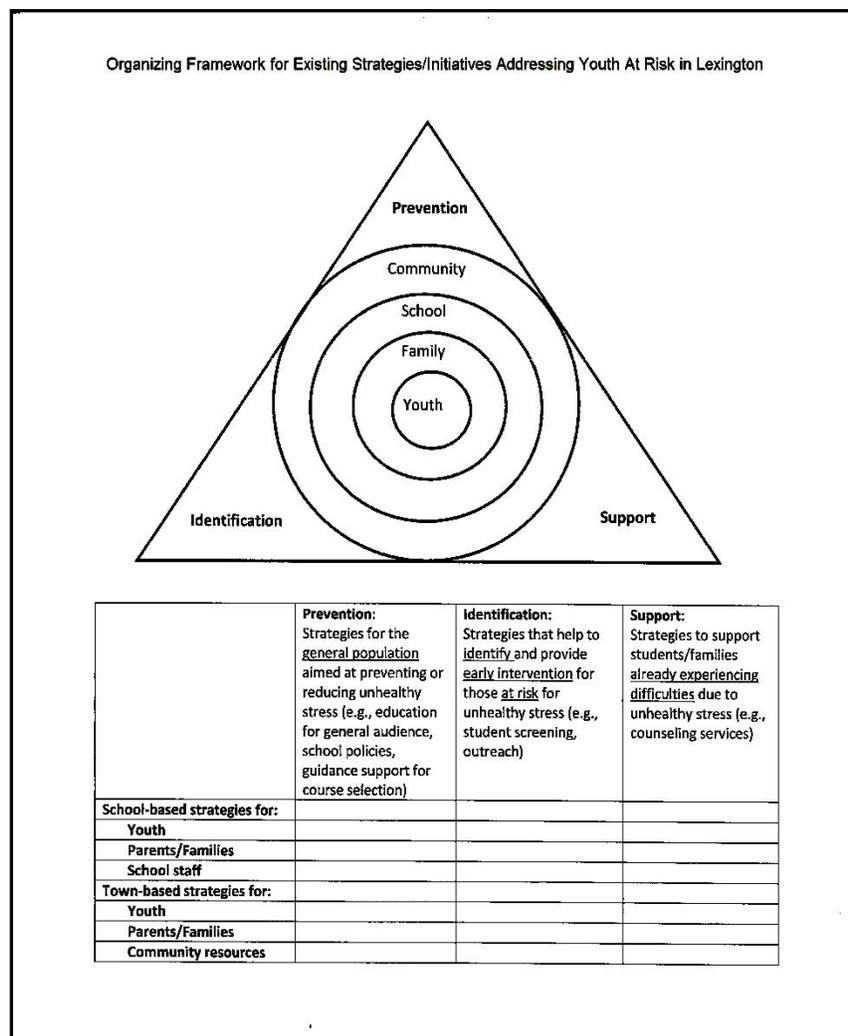
The Ad Hoc Committee which was established as a one-year committee met monthly, and later weekly, from November 2013 through November 2014. Its work culminates with the submission of this report and a companion presentation to the School Committee.

## V. WHAT WE DID

### Our Framework

As its first step, the Committee wanted to review and obtain information about programs, services, and practices that already exist to support youth and families in Lexington. We needed to develop a framework for gathering information about existing services and programs, and collecting recommendations and ideas for needed services.

We constructed the model (below) that includes three aspects from primary prevention to intervention to serve our youth, i.e., (1) **Prevention** (aimed at the general population), (2) **Identification** (aimed at a selected population), and (3) **Support** (aimed at youth at risk). The model also acknowledges the widening circle of people – from youth to families to schools to community – that need to work together to help our youth.



## Information Gathering

To identify what is currently being done in the schools and community, and to gather ideas for what more can be done, the Committee:

(1) gathered information on current programs and activities being provided by the schools aimed at reducing stress and building resiliency for students, as well as services for youth at risk. We developed a questionnaire to be completed by the Principal of each school using the Survey Monkey online tool. The Principals were asked to both describe all of the current efforts in their schools to prevent and reduce unhealthy stress and build resiliency, and to offer any ideas and suggestions they might have on additional steps that should be taken. We then had follow-up meetings with the Principals of all nine schools (or an Assistant Principal, in one case) as well as with teachers and staff to explore some of these questions in more detail.

(2) used a similar approach, although not the online tool, to learn about activities and programs in the community. Questionnaires were given or sent to various town and community entities including private practitioners, physicians, and community groups. We also met with Charlotte Rogers, Emily Lavine, and Matt Ryan in the town Department of Human Services, as well as with the Youth Services Council and the Human Services Committee.

(3) learned about what is being done in comparable communities such as Needham and Newton (both of these communities have had to deal with a series of student suicides). We met with the Directors of Youth Services in Newton, Bedford, Needham and Winchester, the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction in Needham and the Superintendent of Schools in Weston.

(4) did literature searches on sites like CASEL and Challenge Success to better understand the current research and evidence-based recommendations regarding student stress. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a national organization whose mission is to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) an integral part of education. Challenge Success is a research-based organization from Stanford University that provides schools and families with information and strategies to create a more balanced and academically fulfilling life for children.

In addition to gathering information, Committee members held numerous discussions about issues and concerns related to stress on youth. Based on these discussions, the input received from those we interviewed or surveyed, and our own understanding of the issue, we drafted the recommendations contained herein.

## Existing Programs and Efforts in Schools, Town, and Community

### The Schools

It should be emphasized that there are noteworthy efforts already being undertaken throughout the Lexington Public Schools to reduce student stress, build resiliency, and to identify and provide services to youth at risk. These efforts need to be supplemented, intensified, and coordinated so that all of the students benefit from them.

Current programs and efforts include SEL-based programs like Open Circle, Responsive Classroom and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in the elementary schools and Rachel's Challenge in the middle schools. Health education classes, which emphasize developing and applying critical thinking skills to real life challenges, are taught at both the middle and high schools. The K-12 Prevention Program includes a Peer Educator Initiative which increases youth awareness of important health and wellness issues such as alcohol and drug use, other risky behaviors, decision making skills, and peer pressure. Efforts are also being made at LHS and other schools to improve the climate and assess how homework practices can be improved. In addition, mindfulness practice has been initiated by some teachers and schools with support from the Lexington Education Foundation (LEF). The Therapeutic Learning Programs (TLP) at the middle schools and high school serve students who need support for emotional and behavioral issues. The Alpha Program at the high school is a very successful re-entry program for students who have been hospitalized, and similar programs are being planned for the middle schools.

The School Health Advisory Council (SHAC) provides an effective forum for educators, health professionals, parents, and community group representatives to discuss issues, programs, and services for the physical and emotional well-being of students. There may well be other programs and initiatives in the schools but, as noted elsewhere in this report, what is being done throughout the District is very poorly communicated to parents and the community.

### The Town

#### *Mental Health Services for Children and Adolescents*

The town funds two staff positions, one full-time and one part-time, within the Human Services Department. The full-time social worker (LICSW), the Assistant Director of Youth and Family Services, provides crisis intervention, information and referral, and support services for youth at risk. The part-time, Youth Program Coordinator, provides some prevention and group work to middle school students. Both positions are currently vacant but a hiring process is underway.

This year the Board of Health received a CHNA15 grant to provide prevention programs in the community. Working with the Prevention Services Coordinator at Lexington Youth and Family Services (LYFS), the Mental Health First Aid program will train adults, in the community, including police, fire and town employees to better help people with mental health issues. Some of the MHFA programs will be training adults who work with youth.

### Other Youth Services

The town offers Lexington other services through the Health Department, Lexington Police and Fire Departments, the Recreation Department, and others, as well as town supported programs that contribute to the physical, social, and emotional development and well-being of Lexington youth.

## **The Community**

### Mental Health Services for Children and Adolescents

Our community has an abundance of individuals, groups, and service organizations that provide a range of mental health and support services to youth and families. Some of these include:

- Private mental health practitioners and group practices
- Hospitals - e.g., McLean, Emerson, Mt. Auburn - inpatient, outpatient, day treatment
- Massachusetts Department of Mental Health
- Lexington Youth and Family Services
- Wayside Community Services
- The Advocates - psychiatric emergency services
- The Edinburg Center

### Other Youth Services

Many individuals, groups and service organizations also provide a broad range services to youth and families such as recreation, arts, education, health, and social activities. Some of these include:

- Cary Library
- Faith-based Youth Groups
- Lexington Interfaith Clergy Association (LICA)
- The Youth Commission
- PTO, PTSA and other parent groups
- Physicians (Pediatricians)
- Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts
- The Munroe Center for the Arts
- Lexington Youth Summer Theater
- Civic Organizations (e.g., Lions, Rotary)
- Hayden Recreation Center
- Lexington Education Foundation
- Lexington Boosters
- Lexington Community Endowment
- Lexington Food Pantry
- Lexington Community Education

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS WITH FULL NARRATIVES

The Committee's recommendations are proposed actions and efforts to be done by the schools, town government, and the community. The full list of recommendations for all three of them is presented in the **Summary of Recommendations** at the beginning of this report. In this section, we will describe each recommendation more fully.

Because reducing stress, building resiliency, and serving youth at risk is a community issue that requires action by the town government and the community as well as the schools, the specific recommendations are presented in a manner that shows what each should do to implement the six major recommendations being made. Underlying these recommendations is the need for collaborative efforts and organizational structures that must be established to facilitate this collaboration.

In accordance with our framework, some recommendations are aimed at (1) **prevention** for the general population to help youth and families reduce and manage stress, build resiliency, and prevent serious consequences and outcomes from unhealthy stress. Meanwhile, other recommendations focus on (2) **identification** of youth who show signs of being at risk, including emotional, physical or psychological difficulties, or risky behavior, and (3) providing **support** services for youth at risk who already do or would potentially engage in risky or harmful behavior.

### OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Addressing student stress and risky behavior requires **community engagement**. It is an issue that needs the involvement of the town, schools, parents, and the community.
2. Enhancing **social and emotional intelligence** builds resilience in youth, increases pro-social behavior, and leads to greater success academically, socially, and personally.
3. We need to find ways to help **reduce sources of unnecessary and unhealthy stress** for youth whenever possible, including academic, extracurricular, peer, family, and societal sources of stress.
4. If we can **redefine success** in a way that is not just achievement-oriented, young people will have more avenues for feeling successful and accomplished.
5. Reducing stress for students will not compromise academic achievement; rather, **less stress may improve academic performance**.
6. Young people need to learn how to **create balance** in their lives and make healthy choices, including not overloading themselves, eating well, getting adequate sleep.
7. Our youth are affected by the attitudes, behavior, and values around them, so by **changing the culture and climate** in schools, at home, and in the community, they can learn to reduce stress and make better choices.
8. It is vital to **identify youth at risk** and **provide support and resources** in the town, schools, and community to serve their needs.

## RECOMMENDATION #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.

### **The Need for Strong, Visible Leadership**

Addressing this issue – reducing unhealthy student stress, building the resiliency of our youth, preventing risky behaviors, and providing services to youth and families at risk – requires visible and effective leadership – in the school system, by town government, and in the community.

While many acknowledge there is a serious problem in Lexington, there is no leader in the schools, no leader in town government, and no effective organizational vehicle in the community for mobilizing its considerable resources.

A successful effort will take time – information needs to be provided, attitudes and behaviors changed, programs initiated - and this in turn requires ongoing leadership.

### **Recommendation #1 SCHOOLS**

In the schools, for the past several years, an explicit written priority for the District has been to “Increase student pro-social behavior and resiliency and reduce sources of unhealthy student stress”. Yet it is not clear all that is being done to meet this goal, what has been tried, what has worked, what has not worked, what has been learned, what is planned for the future. We know there are some exemplary efforts – notably by Jennifer Wolfrum and Julie Fenn primarily at the high school – and noteworthy programs in many of the elementary and middle schools – Open Circle, Responsive Classroom and PBIS. Additional activities are mentioned in individual school improvement plans.

But there is no clear, comprehensible picture of what is being accomplished throughout the District. While we have met with virtually all of the school principals, we are still not sure we have a complete view of what’s being done. Nor is there a clear vision or plan of where the District wants to go in meeting this priority.

This reflects the lack of organizational clarity on who is responsible district wide, to the School Committee, for the achievement of this goal. Who is leading this effort? Who is accountable? Who is ensuring an ongoing focus? Who is advocating and mobilizing resources district wide?

**Recommendation #1**

Schools
<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>

**Designate senior administrator to lead district effort.** A senior administrator should be designated by the Superintendent to lead the district-wide effort to research, plan, execute, and assess initiatives throughout the district. The Superintendent should have this person report to the School Committee on a regular (perhaps quarterly) basis and ensure a systematic and comprehensive communications effort to inform the community about what is being done and planned. Our recommendations entail initiatives in the classroom, guidance, social services, and Professional Learning, as well as the faculty /staff wellness program, so this person should have the necessary organizational “clout” to mobilize efforts through the LPS system. He/she should also be able to work closely with the Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources to make stress reduction and resiliency building a significant part of the LPS Employee Wellness Program. While this is of course the Superintendent’s prerogative, we strongly recommend that whomever he designates should be at the Assistant Superintendent level in the LPS Central Office. This leader may well require

additional resource support.

**Create district-wide Stress Reduction and Resiliency Working Group.** This leader should chair a district-wide Stress Reduction and Resiliency Working Group, consisting of principals, administrators, guidance, wellness and special education staff, and classroom teachers. This Working Group, which could meet monthly, will share information and ideas among schools about what is being tried, what has been learned, what is being planned; identify new programs and initiatives that can be tried; and monitor the effectiveness of the various efforts. This group should consider utilizing a consultant experienced in implementing district-wide SEL programs. This organizational model is logical and based on what apparently has been a successful effort in Needham.

A particularly important aspect of the leader’s job is to ensure the effective communication of current and comprehensive information to the community on activities and plans with regard to meeting this priority. At this point, from looking at the LPS website, there is no way to know that

increasing student pro-social behavior and resiliency and reducing sources of unhealthy student stress is a priority for the school system much less to learn what programs and activities are being undertaken to achieve this priority. There are many good efforts throughout the system – about which many Lexington parents and residents would be interested in learning -- but there is no straightforward way for them to do this. As an example of what could be done in Lexington, we recommend that the leader look at the portion of the Needham Public School website concerning their Social and Emotional Learning program -- <http://www.needham.k12.ma.us/sel/index.htm>

**Form an on-site working group in each school.** Within each individual school, it would be beneficial to form an on-site working group in order to find ways to reduce stress, build resiliency, and improve the school climate. These groups should be chaired by the principal or assistant principal and could include teachers, guidance, social work and/or health and wellness staff, classroom aides and other staff who work with students. The on-site groups would share ideas and implement changes to school programs and practices that best suit the needs of the school.

**Recommendation #1 TOWN GOVERNMENT**

**Hire a Director of Youth Services.** For Town Government, the hiring of a "Youth Services Coordinator" ten years ago marked the first time that the Town of Lexington funded a position devoted exclusively to working with youth. Adjacent communities, e.g., Arlington, Burlington, Bedford, have funded youth service positions providing prevention and intervention programs for at risk youth for more than 30 years. The budget and staffing for these critical services are three or four times larger than ours.

We believe the town administration needs to provide strong leadership to address the needs of our at-risk youth. Most important, the needs of youth must be viewed as a "community problem" – not a "school problem."

Therefore we recommend hiring or designating a single full-time position of leadership - a "Director of Youth Services" whose primary responsibility will be to lead a coordinated community effort to provide prevention and intervention services to Lexington youth and families.

**Recommendation #1**

<b>Town Government</b>
<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>

**Create a Committee for Lexington Youth.** The Committee for Lexington Youth, co-chaired by the Director of Youth Services and the designated LPS lead administrator, will facilitate a comprehensive and coordinated effort by the town and the schools to promote and develop programs aimed at building resiliency, reducing stress, and providing counseling and support services to youth at risk. Coordination between the schools and town in developing and delivering services for Lexington's youth is critical. This coordination will ensure that the programs in the town and schools complement and reinforce each other, are more cost-effective and not duplicated, and are comprehensive in scope. This Committee will also work with the Community Resources for Youth Working Group (see below) to mobilize the substantial community resources that are available to serve youth and ensure that they complement the services provided by the town and the schools. The two co-chairs, working together and with the support of the community, will be responsible for managing the Committee's overall effort.

**Provide counseling and support services for youth.** Free and accessible counseling and support services are needed for our youth. These services could be provided directly by the town or contracted for and provided by a youth service agency. In our interview with Charlotte Rodgers, Director of Human Services, a position created six years ago, she offered her belief that it may not be a good idea for a town employee to provide counseling services to youth at risk. We concur. In fact, some other communities with robust youth services do not provide direct services to youth through the town administration, but rather contract for those services with local youth agencies. This was the model for the town-supported non-profit youth service agency, RePlace, Inc., for more than twenty years until 2003. We think this model should be re-considered.

We were struck by the fact that the social/emotional needs of our youth seem to be largely unpublicized by the town. For example, we could not find the YRBS information - specifically that **over 15% of the students at LHS reported that they had seriously considered suicide last year and 55 LHS students tried to kill themselves** - anywhere on the town website. This is in marked contrast to other communities where information about youth risky behavior is displayed prominently on the town and schools websites.

### Recommendation #1 COMMUNITY

An important theme throughout all our recommendations is a call for robust involvement of key community groups and individuals to work closely with the schools and town in providing prevention and intervention youth services.

We recommend the immediate creation of a community leadership group called the "Community Resources for Youth Working Group". Operating under the town's Committee for Lexington Youth, this group will closely coordinate its efforts with school and town programs to provide community-based services to both the general youth population and youth at risk. Members, both adult and youth, would be concerned individuals drawn from groups such as PTO, physicians, mental health

providers, civic organizations, civic clubs, school-based clubs, faith-based organizations, quasi-public and non-profit organizations (e.g., Cary Library, Munroe Center for the Arts), and local businesses.

Lexington is a town rich in human resources. People with renowned expertise, knowledge, and skills live in Lexington and many already devote countless hours to our youth. We have found that many youth programs and services sponsored by community groups are not integrated into an overall community plan or coordinated with other services that would enhance their reach and effectiveness.

The Community Resources for Youth Working Group will provide leadership and direction from the community to identify needed youth services and coordinate community programs with school and town services.

In addition, the Community Resources for Youth Working Group will develop and organize community forums, education programs, and town-wide events aimed at promoting discussion and educating the community on social and emotional health, reducing stress, and supporting youth at risk. It can also act as a liaison in order to coordinate the community education programs and forums for youth and families offered by various community groups.

**Recommendation #1**

<b>Community*</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Under the auspices of the Committee for Lexington Youth, 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 will 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>

**RECOMMENDATION #2**

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

**Recommendation #2 SCHOOLS**

**Recommendation #2**

<b>Schools</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Expand, initiate and coordinate evidence-based <b>Social-Emotional Learning</b> programs with 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>

**Continuity and alignment of Social-Emotional Learning Programs.** There has been much work done in the schools to help students and youth to build resiliency, enhance social-emotional intelligence, manage stress, create balance in their lives, and improve overall wellness. Our committee's major recommendation is to expand current social and emotional learning (SEL) opportunities within the schools.

SEL is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Social and emotional skills are critical to being a good student, citizen, and worker; and many risky behaviors (e.g., drug use, violence, bullying, and dropping out) can be prevented or reduced when multi-year, integrated efforts are used to develop students' social and emotional skills. Effective SEL programming begins in preschool and continues through high school.

While the schools provide many SEL opportunities for students, there is the need to ensure consistency across grade levels and schools, and continuity from one grade level to the next, from Kindergarten through Grade 12. Some SEL programs are provided by classroom teachers,

while others are provided by the Health and Wellness, and Guidance departments, often in conjunction with teachers and other educators.

At the elementary level, programming includes Open Circle, Mind-Up, Superflex, and Zones of Regulation. At the middle school level, programming includes cyber-citizenship and anti-bullying curriculum provided by the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, Rachel's Challenge, and other locally developed curricula. At the middle and high school, SEL curriculum is incorporated into health classes.

Our recommendation is to expand these SEL programs and efforts in a way that ensures consistency of their implementation across all schools in a given level, and that provides continuity and alignment of SEL efforts from one level to the next to create an integrated K-12 program.

**Professional Learning for SEL.** Teachers and support staff should have additional professional learning opportunities and supports so they can help students to learn and grow in SEL areas and effectively employ strategies they have learned.

**Evaluate current programs and consider alternative approaches.** There is a need to evaluate the current SEL programming and determine whether there should be any changes or additions. SEL requires adequate time allocation, personnel, and resources. Often, time on learning academic tasks leaves little consistent time for SEL. Additional personnel in the form of guidance counselors and health educators may also be necessary to provide more SEL. At the elementary level, in particular, the number of counselors per student is very low, which results in counselor time being pulled toward reactive responses in acute situations, with little time left for preventive SEL.

The LPS should evaluate the effectiveness of current programs for reducing stress and building resiliency at all levels, including morning meeting time at elementary schools, intervention/exploratory blocks in middle schools, and extended homerooms at LHS. Teachers and staff should evaluate the use, consistency, and effectiveness of morning meeting time in elementary schools and intervention and exploratory blocks in middle schools. At LHS, student feedback would be useful in evaluating programming in the extended homerooms to determine their efficacy in helping students manage stress and build resiliency. It would also be useful to evaluate the adequacy of training for homeroom teachers and for students who run peer-led sessions. Based on evaluations, the schools should make improvements or consider alternative approaches for incorporating SEL, managing stress, and building resiliency into school practice.

**Mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques.** Mindfulness practice is a proven and effective way to reduce stress and enhance overall emotional health. There are teachers who are already integrating mindfulness into their classrooms. We should build on these initiatives to expand mindfulness practice into all of the LPS classrooms to help both teachers and students. More pilots should be initiated. One idea that could be tried is a "mindfulness minute" at the beginning of each class in middle and high school. For a minute, the teacher and the students will do a breathing exercise or some other technique aimed at relaxing them so that they are better able to engage in

learning and better able to teach more effectively. Teachers could receive training on how to use other mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques in their classrooms.

**Reinstate and increase frequency of health education.** Health education is not offered in the elementary schools, creating another disconnect between SEL opportunities at one level versus the next. Engaging students in SEL at young ages is critical in developing their social-emotional intelligence and building resiliency early on, and will form the foundation for their social and emotional growth. Through health education in elementary school, students will learn to develop healthy habits at young ages. At the middle and high school levels, allocation of counselors and health educators, as well as student schedules, do not allow for adequate time for SEL. Adding more health education classes will create more time for SEL and other health/wellness programming. Therefore, we recommend that the LPS consider reinstating health education in the elementary schools and increasing the frequency of health education classes in the middle and high schools.

**Wellness programs for staff.** Expanded wellness opportunities for educators will help adults to manage their own stress and model this behavior for students. Efforts to reduce stress for teachers and staff will not only benefit them but will also make them more effective at teaching and helping students.

**Personal connection to an adult.** Developing a personal connection with an adult in their school can make an important difference in students' lives. When students believe that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals, they feel more connected to the school which can contribute to reducing the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors and increasing the likelihood of academic success. If a student has a trusted adult at school, he or she has someone to go to when emotional, social, academic, or stress-related difficulties arise.

## Recommendation #2 TOWN GOVERNMENT

**Establish a Youth Center.** Central to this recommendation is a town-supported Youth Center: a place for teens to go and "just be" - not a place for academic or extracurricular achievement or recreation - but a place of acceptance, comfort, social connection, and emotional support.

The need for a youth operated youth center has long been identified as vital by many community groups and in a survey of the young people themselves. A Youth Center can be an important tool in reaching isolated, disconnected, at-risk youth who are having difficulties connecting in traditional ways in school and in the community.

The proven, most effective model is one of empowerment - directly involving young people, who might otherwise feel powerless and hopeless, in the operation of the youth center. In essence, the young people themselves must feel ownership and take responsibility for its success. (Note that this was recommended in April 2014 by the Assistant Director of Youth and Family Services, Emily Lavine, and Matt Ryan, Youth Program Coordinator, Lexington Human Services Department.)

To initiate the program we recommend that a working group of youth and adults be created to form the foundation of a Youth Center Board. This group, under the direction of the Director of Youth Services, should represent various segments of the youth adult community, including disengaged youth who are less connected to traditional institutions and services.

We suggest that this working group visit youth centers in other communities and consult with people with expertise in starting and operating youth centers.

Other specific recommendations for the town government call for: (1) free or low-cost access to stress relieving activities, such as yoga, recreation, and art through the Town, the Community Center, the Youth Center, and other sites; (2) online listings of both town-sponsored and outside resources in the community for stress management, health and wellness; and (3) work with community and business leaders to engage youth in community service programs including interning and mentoring programs.

**Recommendation #2**

<b>Town Government</b>
<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, 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>

**Recommendation #2 COMMUNITY**

**The role of parents and community.** A strong family-school-community connection has proven to improve academic and social outcomes for students. Families and schools are woven into the broader community and both influence, and are influenced by the culture of the community at large.

It is important that community entities (through representatives) be invited to participate in efforts *to listen* to the community (e.g. any town-wide forums) and *to create* effective family school-community partnerships that encourage community buy-in.

Those relationships can be leveraged for the benefit of students as comprehensive wraparound community services are developed to address the academic, health, and social needs of our children. Community resources can offer important opportunities for social-emotional learning outside the context of school. Already, many of the most important town-wide cohesion building events in Lexington are sponsored by organizations outside the schools. Some of these include the Fourth of July Carnival, Lexington Lions Club, Halloween Trick or Treating, Lexington Retailers Association, and LexFUN! In addition many organizations support student/family activities and fund student scholarships.

**Organize community education forums for parents and youth.** The Committee recommends that the Community Resources for Youth Working Group work with community groups and local business to organize community education forums for parents and youth on topics such as social-emotional learning and building resiliency, mindfulness-based stress reduction approaches, stress-relief techniques and activities, the role of sleep in learning and mood regulation, how to balance academic achievement and emotional well-being, and improving work-family balance. The Community Resources for Youth Working Group would also act as a liaison in coordinating education programs and activities offered by other community groups.

**Develop a parent's guide to social-emotional learning.** Representatives from the Community Resources for Youth Working Group could work with the schools to develop a Parent's Guide to Social-Emotional Learning. This would help to educate parents on what is being done in schools so that parents can complement social-emotional learning practices from school with their children at home, using common language, lessons, and values.

**Establish community-based peer leadership and mentoring programs.** The Committee recommends that the community work with town youth services, through the Human Services department or a contracted non-profit, to establish community-based peer leadership and mentoring programs to complement those in the schools.

**Recommendation #2**

<b>Community</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Organize <b>community forums and education programs</b> coordinated by the Community Resources for Youth 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>

**RECOMMENDATION #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.**

**Recommendation #3 SCHOOLS**

**Recommendation #3**

Schools
<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</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>

**Homework best practices.** Homework is an emotionally laden topic – for both students and parents. According to the 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 96% of LHS students reported being under stress because of homework.

It’s not just about the volume. Homework can be a source of unnecessary stress because students do not understand the homework assignment (and worry about it); they think that they need to get it all right in order to get a good grade (even though they do not understand it); if they are struggling with it, they don’t know how much time they are expected to spend on it (instead of other work, sleep, family time); or they do not understand its educational purpose. Recently published research concerning students in affluent high-performing high schools like Lexington High School showed that too much homework is associated with greater stress, health problems such as exhaustion, sleep deprivation, weight loss and stomach problems, and less time for friends, family, and extracurricular pursuits (“Nonacademic Effects of Homework in Privileged, High Performing High Schools, *Journal of Experimental Education 2013.81:490-510*).

While we do not presume to tell teachers how they should use homework in teaching their students, we strongly believe that teachers must find the time to identify best practices, discuss

them among themselves (e.g. in Professional Learning Communities), then determine what changes should be tried, perhaps on a pilot basis. They should also be provided with Professional Learning opportunities to understand homework best practices. Some examples of best practices are:

- (1) state the purpose of the homework on the assignment (e.g. practice, check for understanding, reflect on discussion in class or pre-learn, such as outlining a chapter before discussion)
- (2) state the expected amount of time to complete or the maximum time to spend on the assignment)
- (3) take time in class to discuss the homework assignment and possibly give students a few minutes to begin the assignment – to make sure they understand it
- (4) provide feedback rather than a grade, with the goal of improving learning, promoting student ownership of the learning, and encouraging self-assessment

As a vehicle to facilitate their discussions, we would encourage the teachers to read a paper prepared by Challenge Success entitled “Changing the Conversation about Homework from Quantity and Achievement to Quality and Engagement.”

<http://www.challengesuccess.org/portals/0/docs/ChallengeSuccess-Homework-WhitePaper.pdf> An excellent and concise book is *Rethinking Homework* by Cathy Vatterot, an associate professor of education at the University of Missouri, and a former teacher and principal.

As part of its 2014-2015 School Improvement Plan, LHS will be having faculty discussions on homework practices to evaluate the use of homework, identify strategies, and make suggestions for possible change. We commend the effort LHS is making to examine and discuss homework by the teaching staff.

The School Committee should budget sufficient funds to enable teachers to examine best practices and institute pilot programs. The district-wide homework policy, last revised in 1989, is outdated and needs to be revised. The current time guidelines for elementary, middle, and high school homework are not an accurate reflection of actual practice and should be eliminated or revised. New policies and guidelines are needed most at middle and high school because students have work assigned by multiple teachers.

Parents also need to re-examine their assumptions about homework. Many assume that the more time students spend on homework, the higher their grades and test scores tend to be. Research does not support this assumption and, in fact, too much time spent on homework can lead to lower test scores because of health problems such as stress, exhaustion, and headaches. For the emotional health of their children, parents should examine their assumptions and review the research.

*“There is simply an overload of testing... It has reached the point that there is never a day that testing isn’t happening at school. This creates stress in students and parents and is a never-ending source of stress for teachers. And a stressed teacher creates stress in the classroom. Stressed students do poorly on tests and then even more testing is required. It is a vicious circle.”*

*~ LPS Principal*

**Revise workload policies and practices.** Much of the academic stress that students experience is related to the workload, especially at the high school and to some extent in middle school. Students feel that the total amount of the work required can be overwhelming and relentless, particularly if they are taking challenging courses. Some of the sources of stress regarding workload are that:

- (1) the sum total of work from multiple courses can become overwhelming and unmanageable
- (2) the workload is continuous with little or no respite
- (3) workload stress is exacerbated when a student has simultaneous or overlapping major assignments, tests, or projects

These concerns need to be addressed through internal review of school policies and practices, and cooperative faculty discussions. We recommend the following issues be addressed in terms of workload stress and offer suggested actions to consider:

1. *Overall workload that is overwhelming or unmanageable*

- Evaluate assignments on their necessity, purpose, and relevance for learning. Eliminate unnecessary and repetitive work when possible. Establish consensus on a suitable amount of work at each course level.
- Consider innovative approaches to reduce excess work, e.g. a standards-based approach – once a student reaches understanding of a concept, allow him/her to discontinue repetitive work.
- Provide teachers with a better understanding of the workload from the student’s perspective, e.g. “a day in the life of an LHS student”
- Permit more “free passes” for late work submission; reduced rather than zero credit for late work.
- Extend time allowed for make-up work when a student is absent.

*“I wish my teachers had better understood how hard the students were working and how late they stay up. I wish that instead of telling the kid sleeping on the desk ‘to sit up and pay attention’, they gave us a night off from homework.*

*~ LHS student*

2. *Continuous workload with little or no respite*

- Ensure regular enforcement of the “no homework over vacations and holidays” policy. Assignments/projects due shortly after a vacation break should not require extensive work over the break.
- Create occasional respites from work, such as occasional homework-free weekends or homework-free days every quarter.
- Reassess the quantity and nature of summer assignments. Consider eliminating or minimizing written assignments for AP courses in summer.

3. *Simultaneous or overlapping assignments, tests, or projects*

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the “flexible” policy for multiple exams and projects on the same day. This puts the onus on students to come forward. Many students are

either reluctant to approach a teacher or don't bother because it merely puts off the required work and doesn't always ease their situation.

- Seek alternative solutions to this problem, including scheduling systems to avoid major tests on same day, and coordinating the due dates for long-range projects.

*“The quarter system works in such a way that teachers usually have their “big assignments” due around the same time. On any given ‘last Friday of the semester’ a student will likely have some combination of essays, projects, and tests. And while most teachers are usually reasonable, there is a stigma against asking for extensions...It quickly becomes overwhelming.”*

*~ LHS student*

It should be emphasized that reducing the pressures related to workload does not mean compromising academic standards. In fact, the intensity of the workload may actually contribute toward less effective learning on the part of students. We urge that teachers maintain the focus on purposeful and essential coursework.

**LHS Course Offerings, Levels, and Sequencing.** We recommend that the administration examine and consider altering LHS course offerings, levels, and sequences in specific areas where alternative options would provide more appropriate choices for students. When course choices lead students to stretch too far beyond their capabilities, they can experience unnecessary and unhealthy stress. The most often-cited area where some students find themselves overextended and unduly stressed is the gap between Level 1 (College Preparatory) and Advanced Placement (AP) courses in sophomore and junior years.

Adding honors level courses in Grades 10 and 11. The jump from Level 1 to AP is most problematic in Grade 10, for World History and Biology. Sophomore students are young and developmentally less well-prepared to handle the rigor of a college level course and the independent work habits expected for AP classes. AP World History continues on from freshman history, but with a faster, higher-level, more conceptual approach. AP Biology covers an entirely new scientific subject for which students have not had previous preparation. Many sophomores find it very challenging to jump from 9<sup>th</sup> grade Earth Science to college level biology. Currently nearly one third of 10<sup>th</sup> grade students are enrolled in AP Biology sections. While some are capable of thriving in AP Biology, the high enrollment suggests that many of those students might be served better with an honors level class. An honors course would also serve Level 1 students who would like a more challenging curriculum but are afraid to take the AP class. Another problem is that some students take both AP World History and AP Biology because they want the highest level courses possible, but then find the workload overwhelming and very stressful. Having an honors level in either history or science in Grade 10 could alleviate this problem by allowing students to take one AP and one honors class.

*“Junior year for your typical LHS honors student is a sick joke. I pulled my share of all nighters and had a healthy number of breakdowns. It was weird being on my computer at three in the morning and seeing that almost everyone from my AP US history class was also on-line. Most of my friends went, at least, a little crazy. A few became minorly depressed.*

*~ LHS graduate*

Although Grade 11 students are more developmentally capable, they still are faced with course choices that can lead to stressful workloads. At this stage, larger numbers of students elect to take both AP U.S. History and AP Chemistry, so having the option to take one at the honors level would be helpful. Currently, nearly half of the juniors are enrolled in AP Chemistry, an unreasonably high percentage. The burgeoning enrollment in both AP Chemistry and AP Biology suggests that an honors level is called for. It indicates that students are choosing AP because it is the only higher-level option. An honors course could be a more appropriate choice for many

students and would help distribute students into more suitable levels.

We strongly urge that the administration and teaching staff examine the problem and consider the best alternative options for offering appropriate course levels to students. Adding honors levels might not be the best option in all cases, but the school should explore suitable ways to alter course offerings to help alleviate the problem. While teacher load, extra class preparations and staffing are considerations, the schools must make the best interest of students a priority if they are serious about addressing student stress. It does not serve students or teachers well to have students who are academically overextended in their classes or are experiencing excessive stress.

Science course preparation and sequencing. Adequate preparation for AP science courses is a concern that contributes to student stress and overload. Compared to comparable area high schools, Lexington is the only school where students take each science subject for one year only, as an AP, Level 1 or Level 2 class. Therefore, students who take an AP science course have not had a year of study in the subject prior to taking the AP, as is done at other schools. Going into an AP science course without adequate preparation can make these courses particularly stressful for LHS students. Moreover, LHS is the only school that offers an AP science course in Grade 10 without a prior year of general study. At most schools, students do not take AP sciences until junior or senior year. For LHS students, taking AP Biology as sophomores without prior preparation can be challenging and stressful, both academically and developmentally. There are many factors and tradeoffs involved in contemplating a restructuring of science course sequencing, so exploring the desirability and feasibility of making such a changing would take careful consideration. It would need to be well thought-out and evaluated through a long-term planning process.

**Greater choice and flexibility of course options.** The previous section addressed a specific area where a gap in levels for certain course options puts some students at LHS in a more stressful situation. There is another broader kind of change in course offerings that could help reduce stress for students at all ability levels at the middle schools and high school. When students can choose courses that closely align to their abilities and their interests, they can manage better, will be more engaged, and will feel less stress.

We encourage the middle schools and high school to look for opportunities to offer greater choice and flexibility of course options. The current course choices and electives for seniors at LHS are a good example. Rather than taking a general, standard class in English and social studies, seniors are allowed to choose electives that align with their interests. They are satisfying cluster requirements but in a way that is closer to their own interests and passions. In another example, students who might struggle in a standard science course like physics, but are interested in human anatomy or engineering or the environment, could find it more interesting and less stressful to have alternate options. More flexible options in certain subject areas could help students meet requirements in a less stressful, more engaging way and would serve students at all ability levels.

LPS could consider relaxing the cluster requirements to help alleviate stress for some students. The cluster requirements in Lexington, i.e. requiring four years of history, math, science and English, are more demanding than the state mandates which require four years of study only in English. Standards would not be compromised because most students at LHS would take four years of these subjects anyway. Changing the cluster requirements, along with offering great flexibility of choices for fulfilling requirements, could be helpful in reducing stress.

**Well-defined recommendation procedures for course placement.** During course selection time, a student's current teacher in a given subject makes the recommendation for the student's placement into the course level in that subject area for the next year. Since teachers can base the recommendation on any criteria they choose to consider and are not required to document their recommendation procedures, the recommendations may appear to be rather subjective.

We recommend that the high school and middle schools define consistent and clear recommendation procedures for courses to ensure proper placement of students. Well-defined criteria would aid teachers in making their recommendations and ensure that the process is consistent across all situations. Schools could design and adopt a simple system where teachers assess students on categories of factors that contribute to their recommendation. Examples of categories might include grades, homework and tests, class participation, student's work habits, capacity for independent learning, student's motivation, improvement over time, comprehension of the material, or other factors. This would help in placing students in more appropriate levels and acknowledge the fact a variety of factors, not just grades, contribute toward a student's ability to succeed in a given class. It does not preclude teachers from having conversations with students about their placement and teachers can even factor in a student's motivation in their assessment.

The implementation of consistent and clear recommendation procedures would help to reduce stress for students, teachers, and parents. Most importantly, this would help reduce stress by ensuring that students are placed into appropriate course levels. By considering multiple factors, it becomes less likely for a student to be placed into a class where the independent work habits or other non-academic requirements needed cause undue stress on the student. It would be less stressful for teachers because their incoming classes would be more likely to be comprised of students who have not only the academic ability, but also the work habits and study skills necessary to succeed.

A well-defined process can help reduce stress and save valuable time for teachers, administrators, and guidance personal because it may help reduce the number of appeals and provide concrete justification for placements when appeals do occur. The detailed assessments done by teachers need not be made public, but could be useful in appeals cases. Establishing a consistent system for teacher recommendations will reduce stress and frustration for students and parents because the recommendation procedures would become more transparent and holistic.

**Making balanced choices for course selection.** The high school and middle schools should explore ways to assist, inform, and educate students and families in making balanced and appropriate choices for course selection. Making informed, well-considered course choices is the best way to keep students from selecting a course load that is too difficult or stressful. Some students opt to take multiple AP courses, others take occasional AP/honors classes, and some take mainly Level 1 or 2 courses.

Although it has been suggested that LHS limit the total number of AP courses a student can take as a means of reducing stress, we are not recommending it as a policy change. There is no one-size-fits-all number. Rather, students should make informed decisions that are suitable to their needs and ability. In the end, students are responsible for making their own choices, based on teacher recommendations. However, schools can assist them and their families in the process.

The schools should provide more clear and consistent information about the course expectations and workload for all courses in advance, during course selection time. Teachers often have this information presented in a syllabus given to enrolled students when they begin the semester. It's too late at that point for students to be learning about what is expected of them. It would be more useful to have access to the information when they are deciding to register for a class. On the department website, there could be either a sample syllabus or a detailed description of the course expectations and the approximate weekly or daily workload for each course level in a given subject.

Schools can play a role in educating students and families about how to select courses that are appropriate and balanced. Messages and guidance to parents and students can be communicated through the school website and at Curriculum Night. The schools could consider sending home Time Planning sheets where students list all the hours needed for their anticipated weekly course workload, extracurricular activities, outside commitments, sports, jobs, social and family time, and relaxation/down time. If students add up all of their time commitments in advance, they may notice conflicts and become more cognizant of potential overload. Students and families can then make more realistic decisions about the total commitments undertaken by the student.

During course selection, guidance counselors should play an active role in helping students create reasonable and balanced course choices. Counselors should especially reach out to students who register for a particularly demand course load.

**Consider later start time for LHS.** Research studies show that adolescents who don't get enough sleep often suffer physical and mental health problems, an increased risk of automobile accidents, and a decline in academic performance. The biological rhythms that regulate adolescent sleep cycles cause teens to tend to stay up late, yet they must wake up early for school. As a result, many teens are chronically sleep-deprived which is both stressful and unhealthy.

In August 2014, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued a policy statement recommending that high schools and middle schools delay the start of classes until 8:30am or later. The AAP policy statement notes that “delaying school start times is an effective countermeasure to chronic sleep loss and has a wide range of potential benefits to students with regard to physical and mental health, safety, and academic achievement.” (AAP Policy Statement on School Start Times for Adolescents, 2014)

*“...stress can still damage, if not ruin, a high school experience. Indeed, my own junior year was characterized by stress. I felt lucky if I got four hours sleep, and every Thursday at 1 AM was “breakdown night.”*

*~ LHS student*

If there is sufficient interest from the school system or the community, we recommend that the LPS look into the possibility of changing to a later start time for LHS in order to determine if it is desirable and workable for the system. It would definitely need further investigation. Changing the start time for the high school is a complex decision, involving schedules for all LPS schools, school buses, and extracurricular activities including sports, as well as the operations of LHS itself. Therefore, if the school system wishes to investigate a later start time, we suggest the formation of a Start Time Task Force to evaluate the benefits and drawbacks and to make proposed recommendations to the system.

A number of school systems across the country have moved toward later start times for high school and/or middle school. Several towns in Massachusetts, including Duxbury and Sharon, have made the shift. If Lexington is interested in the possibility, we suggest that the task force investigate and talk with these school systems to better understand the implications of making such a change

**Recommendation #3 TOWN GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY**

Students and their parents need more information about how to reduce the unnecessary stress in their lives outside of school, how to gain more resilience, and put more balance into their lives. The Committee on Lexington Youth -- where the town, schools and community can work effectively together -- should facilitate the provision of this information.

The sources of this unnecessary stress that can be addressed include: over-scheduling and the resultant lack of downtime to play or be with family and friends; cyber-bullying; excessive peer pressure and competition; misconceptions about how important or necessary it is to attend a highly selective college or university in order to pursue a

**Recommendation #3**

- | <b>Town Government</b>   |
|--|
| <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> |

successful career; and incomplete information about how to locate colleges and universities that provide excellent educations (but are not necessarily showcased by *US News and World Report*) and provide the best fit with an individual student's aspirations and passions.

This information can be provided in several ways. The Committee on Lexington Youth should establish a website with information for adults and youth about the sources of stress, programs/activities in Lexington or nearby which they can use, and links to websites and other sources of information about what they can do. Social media – like FaceBook – should also be used to provide information. The Project Resilience FaceBook page in Ridgefield CT -- <https://www.facebook.com/ProjectResilience/> -- is a good model of the use of social media.

There should also be community forums on what the community can do collectively to minimize unnecessary stress and build resiliency. This information can be aimed specifically at parents, students, or families. For example, there could be a series of parent education programs on topics such as the effects of overscheduling and sleep deprivation, a series of teen education programs dealing with cyberbullying, social media, peer pressure, and lack of sleep, and family programs on these topics as well as the college application process and how to balance academics and emotional well-being.

There should also be programs that will facilitate discussions among parents, students, and families. When students and parents can talk and better understand issues from the other perspective, they will be better able to work together toward reducing stress and creating balance in students' lives.

### Recommendation #3

Community
<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>

**RECOMMENDATION #4**

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

**Recommendation #4 SCHOOLS**

**Recommendation #4**

Schools
<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>

**Identification and support services for students at risk.** The schools already have highly trained staff and protocols and procedures for identifying students at risk. However, as the numbers of students experiencing stress-related problems increases, we suggest that LPS review and enhance its procedures and programming in this area. At the middle and high school level, noticing students who are experiencing excess stress, anxiety, depression, or self-harming behavior is especially difficult. The administration should work with school staff to propose ways of improving their ability to identify students at risk at all grade levels.

**Additional guidance counselors or social workers at elementary level.** Although there are some social workers at the middle and high school levels, there are no social workers currently at the elementary level to help identify and provide support to students with intensive needs, other than those who attend Special Education programs. Although there are highly trained professionals within the schools, their numbers are not adequate for the work to be done in this area. We strongly recommend that the LPS hire social workers or additional guidance counselors to adequately cover the population at all elementary schools.

**Preventive and support programs in middle and high school.** The high school and middle schools have existing programs in place to serve specific groups of students in need, such as the

Therapeutic Learning Program (TLP), Alpha Program, and Special Education (SPED) services for students with an individualized education plan. There are a large number of students who are experiencing high levels of stress-related issues, anxiety, severe depression, psychological issues, or self-harming behavior but who do not qualify for these programs. These students would benefit from the kinds of support services offered by these kinds of programs, such as help with transitioning back in when school has been missed, a safe haven for students with school avoidance, help in keeping up with missed work, and social work and counseling support.

We recommend that LPS explore the possibility of creating additional support programs to serve these students. In many cases, the only current avenue for getting services for individual students is to request services through Special Education. There may be students who need help but may not really belong in SPED, yet their families apply because it is the only option. It is possible that if the schools created additional programs to serve these students, it would off-load some cases the end up in SPED and would ultimately save money for the LPS system.

**Ensure continuity from one level to the next.** As students transition from elementary to middle to high school, guidance and social work staff need to ensure continuity of services for these students. There should be mechanisms for staff to communicate with receiving staff at the next school. Improved data systems could help with tracking students as they go through the system.

**Professional Learning on identifying students at risk.** There is also a recognized need to provide professional learning for classroom teachers and other non-clinically-trained staff to learn how to identify students at risk and the skills for making an appropriate referral to a trained professional within the school. Furthermore, there should be similar programming for students, so they can recognize warning signs of potential risk and strategies for connecting themselves or others to appropriate professionals so help can be obtained.

*“If teachers had time to talk, laugh and relate with their students, they would know who is under stress, but they have no time for this.”*

*~ LPS Administrator*

**Referrals and partnership with Town and Community resources.** It is imperative that there are mechanisms for identifying youth at risk, providing support services, and improving coordination of services and referrals between schools, town, and community. School staff members need a point person in the town government, ideally a Director of Youth Services, who will be a resource for referrals to services and who will coordinate follow-up with school personnel.

**Recommendation #4 TOWN GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY**

The Town Government and the community need to take a more active leadership role in identifying youth at risk and providing prevention and intervention services directly to them. In addition, town and community groups need to strengthen and expand efforts by the Youth Services Council and the Human Services Department to coordinate youth services in the town and work directly with the schools.

The Committee was struck by how the Lexington Public Schools take on so much of the responsibility for identifying and providing services to youth at risk. For example, an extremely valuable tool in identifying numbers and the extent of the problem facing our young people, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), is viewed by most in the community as a *school* survey.

The results of the YRBS are written up and shared by the authors and school personnel, with the LPS solely responsible for publishing the results (the school website is apparently the only place). It follows that the schools that are then viewed as having the main responsibility to implement services and programs in response to the needs uncovered by the YRBS. Other communities view the implementation of the YRBS, and the concerns raised by the results, as a *community* issue, publicizing the full survey results prominently on the Town website, holding town forums to discuss the issues and carry forward a community response.

**Comparison to Other Communities**

Members of the Ad Hoc Committee made site visits to three other nearby towns, Needham, Newton, and Bedford to compare how those communities identify and respond to needs of youth at risk. All three communities place a high

**Recommendation #4**

<b>Town Government</b>
<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>

priority on funding and sustaining prevention and intervention services to youth. In all three of these communities, town-funded youth services are:

- Much more robust than those in Lexington
- Completely integrated with the schools and community agencies
- Accessible and available at low cost or free to youth at risk
- Provided directly by the town or by a contracted mental health agency

For comparison with one town, we selected Needham because it is similar in size, youth population, and median income to Lexington. Here are the numbers and a brief summary of Needham Youth Services:

<b>Needham Youth Services</b>		
	<b>Needham</b>	<b>Lexington</b>
Total population	28,886	31,394
Youth Population (under 18)	28.2% (8145)	26.1% (8194)
Median Household Income	\$125,170	\$138,095
Persons below poverty level	4.2% (1213)	4.0% (1255)

Staffing  
Four full-time staff - the Director, two social workers, one administrative assistant, and NYS is hiring additional new 3/5 position asked for last year. In addition there is one social worker intern, several volunteers, and summer staff of college age students to help, such as child-care during single parent groups.

Funding  
Needham Youth Services is totally town and community funded. The Town budget for FY'15 is \$278,000 with \$273,000 going to salaries. An additional \$15,000/year was raised through events and lots of in-kind contributions.

Cost to clients  
There are no fees for service (except for one substance abuse group but the \$45 charge is often waived). NYS does not bill insurance.

Sources of Referrals  
NYS receives most of its referrals from schools (58%), parents (29%), and community sources. See the 2013 annual report for statistics on the numbers, programs and types of problems.

Services and Programs  
Needham offers a very comprehensive website at <http://www.needhamma.gov/>. A visit to their Youth Services website speaks volumes. The site is full of detailed information about all of Needham's town-supported youth services, including parent resources, and an annual report for 2013 showing numbers of clinical hours and program highlights.

## Suicide Prevention - The Highest Priority

Needham was devastated several years ago by a series of suicides at the high school in a short period. The response by the town government and the community was extraordinary. The town government and community created the Needham Coalition for Suicide Prevention to work with the schools to develop one of the most comprehensive suicide prevention initiatives in the state. This program is aimed at, not just preventing teen suicides, but preventing suicides among all age groups. Currently, the Youth Services Director provides regular QPR (CPR for suicide prevention) training to community groups. In Needham, the intra-structure existed to respond quickly to prevent other tragedies.

The YRBS numbers at LHS (1700 students) are worth repeating. Last year:

- 247 students **seriously** considered suicide
- 137 students made a plan
- 55 students attempted suicide

We believe that our greatest, immediate need is for suicide prevention. Lexington Youth and Family Services, the Lexington Board of Health, and the Human Services Department have secured small CHNA grants to begin to address this need. At this time, however, the town and community have no suicide prevention programs for hundreds of Lexington youth who are at risk.

As we write this report, many teens and parents are reacting with sadness and pain to the suicide of a 2013 LHS graduate. He took his life while attending college. The schools are responding in a planned, coordinated manner by providing support to his brother, other students, and school personnel who are affected. However, the town government and community groups (such as the church youth group, PTO, other caring parents) have no coordinated plan to respond - no way to provide support to his peers, friends and family. The Ad Hoc Committee would like to see this change.

## Recommendation #4

Community
<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 service</li> <li>▪ Solicit <b>community support</b>, including financial support, for mental health services for youth and families</li> </ul>

## **Outreach to Youth At Risk**

Currently, there are no town-supported programs designed to reach out to our youth at risk. Of highest concern are the "disconnected youth", often young men, ages 16-22 years old, who may be withdrawn, depressed, suicidal, and/or potentially homicidal. These young people may be students who are performing well academically, but are socially isolated or disconnected from their peers and not engaged in sports and extracurricular activities. They could be out of school, having dropped out, or between college and career. They are often disconnected from traditional sources of support such as church youth groups, civic clubs, and not connected to community in any way.

Finally, besides a youth center, other forms of outreach can be very effective in reaching at risk youth. Studies show that some of the most effective suicide prevention programs are peer-led youth leadership. People who work with teens know that a friend or peer is most often the first to know when a young person is experiencing trouble with depression, anxiety, eating disorders, or alcohol abuse - not a parent, teacher, coach, or other trusted adult. The empowerment model of peer leadership programs allows for disconnected youth to build peer connection and self-esteem. They are valued for overcoming difficult life experiences and can be most effective in reaching out to others who may be experiencing difficulties.

**RECOMMENDATION #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**

**Recommendation #5 SCHOOLS**

**Recommendation #5**

Schools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Encourage <b>school leaders</b> to make reducing stress and building resiliency 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, and recognize non-academic and collective accomplishments</li> <li>▪ Create a more <b>pro-social climate</b>, address bullying and harassment</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 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 students 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>

**School leaders need to make reducing stress a priority.** Reducing stress and building resiliency is already a district goal. The administration needs to make it a priority and set the direction for the system. It is the principals at each school who can establish it as a priority for their schools and make it an important part of the school culture. Principals should engage teachers and staff in becoming aware of the social-emotional needs of students and in creating a culture that works toward reducing stress. This is not just a concern for health and wellness, nurses, and guidance staff. Classroom teachers need to play a role in reinforcing the messages, being attuned to the social-emotional needs of students, noticing students who show signs of stress, anxiety or harmful behavior, and supporting a shift in the culture. It is a whole school effort.

**Improving the school climate and culture.** Creating a more healthy school climate and culture is critical in making an environment that helps reduce the stress and competitiveness, shifts the focus more on learning, rewards collective accomplishments, and reinforces a positive, pro-social climate.

Perhaps within each school a group of administrators and teachers could work together to develop and implement ideas that would work best for improving the climate in their school. LHS

and the middle schools can engage the students in suggesting ways to improve the climate and make the environment less stressful. This could be done through the LHS Student-Faculty Senate, student officers or representatives, and student feedback or surveys. Schools should encourage the establishment of student-run groups, clubs, and other supports for stress that would be valuable resources for students themselves.

*Academic shift that focuses on learning rather than grades.* Changes in culture related to academics should include a shift in the focus more toward learning and self-enrichment, rather than grades and test scores. It is important to reinforce the message to students (and parents) that the grades and assessments are meant to be reflection of a student's comprehension, skills, and progress in learning, not an end to itself. The recent change to *standards-based report cards* in the elementary schools is an example of assessment that defines and focuses on desired academic and pro-social skills. At the secondary level, students often become more concerned and competitive about grades and individual achievement. Teachers can help by placing emphasis on substantive feedback and comments on students' work, identifying the purpose of work including target concepts and skills, or giving students opportunities to redo/revise work/do test corrections so that grades reflect improvements in learning. Schools, as a whole, need to reinforce this message. They can also consider the impact of their policies, such as how best to open the grade book.

*Recognition of non-academic and collective achievements.* Naturally, students are proud of their accomplishments and achievements, and deserve recognition. However, an over-emphasis on top rankings, high-level awards, and individual achievements can lead to increased competition, a sense of inadequacy for many students, and implicit values by the culture. As much as possible, schools should recognize non-academic as well as academic achievements, and collective as well as individual accomplishments.

**Creating a pro-social climate.** Apart from academic or workload stress, much of the stress that students face comes from social interaction. At elementary levels, it can be seen in the form of bullying, while later it can become personal harassment. Surprisingly, our analysis of the YRBS data showed that harassment was by far the highest predictor of suicide ideation. In classrooms, health classes, and team time/homerooms, it is important to explicitly talk about the effects of harassment on others, whether done in person or through social media. Through repeated messages and common language, hopefully, students will learn to call out unacceptable behavior amongst their peers.

#### **Peer-to-peer competition.**

At LHS, competition among students is very strong. In some circles, there is a great deal of competition, comparison of grades and performance, pressure to take AP courses and challenging course loads, competition about college admissions, and even one-up-man-ship over how late one stays up doing homework. The schools

*“I learned..my own stress.. wasn't coming from myself or my parents, but rather the environment in which I was working and the friends with which I was associating. Constantly being around stressed out peers didn't make me feel completely stress-free.. There is certainly an air of competition that verges on cut-throat at times.”*

*~ LHS student*

should address this directly with students and explicitly try to diffuse the competition. Peer pressure convinces students that they must push themselves extra hard and that they are implicitly in competition with one another. The schools can try to dispel some of the myths and promote a less competitive environment. In classes, peer-to-peer competition could be reduced by having more collaborative learning projects that are group-graded.

**Improve communication to parents, create website, home-school partnership.** The schools have many programs and initiatives in the schools to reduce stress and build resiliency, yet they are not well-known by the parents and community. The district and schools should make substantial improvements in communication to parents. The LHS website on Reducing Stress and Building Resiliency that contains information and resources for parents and students should be updated and made more visible. The district should also create a visible and accessible website on reducing stress and building resiliency. The school-home partnership could be improved by establishing clear guidelines for parents on how and when to communicate with school staff and by providing workshops for staff on how to best to work with families.

**Diversity hiring and training.** We recommend that the administration make concerted efforts toward hiring teachers and staff to reflect the diversity of the student population. The student body is diverse in cultures (30% of the student population is Asian), sexual orientation, and other backgrounds. Hiring practices that reflect this diversity is important with regard to stress in that it improves opportunities for students to find adult mentors who they can better understand them. Providing Professional Learning training for all teachers and staff to help them understand the diverse cultural and other backgrounds of students will help them in supporting the social-emotional needs of students.

#### **Recommendation #5 TOWN GOVERNMENT**

We recommend that the town increase its support to all town departments in working to build a positive climate for Lexington youth.

To its credit, the town has made great progress in working with the schools and community groups to improve the culture and climate for Lexington youth. Increased visibly and expanded outreach to youth has been a goal of many town departments including the Recreation Department, the Human Services Department, and the Police Department for the past several years. The police in particular have emphasized the development of positive relationships with youth through its school resource officers and through general contact with youth and families in the community.

We recommend that the town work with the schools to reach out to community businesses, professionals and local human service providers to explore partnership opportunities that provide opportunities for students to partner with and create connections with adults resulting in greater social integration of youth within the community. Here are some ideas:

- *Business sponsorship* of clubs and/or competitions - Sponsorships could offer mentoring/advising opportunities, as well as financial support for activities such as travel to events. E.g. business sponsorship of science fair or debate activities
- *Speakers Bureau* - Establish a Speakers Bureau of local business people, professionals, scientists and researchers, to speak to students about their chosen fields and advise on pursuing those fields at special events
- *Pro-Bono Work* - Encourage pro-bono work on the part of professionals in the community to assist families/students in need of such services as counseling and legal advice
- *Internships, job shadowing, paid employment* - Work with professionals and businesses to develop internships, mentoring and job shadowing programs and encourage local organizations to provide hands-on opportunities to students

**Recommendation #5**

Town Government
<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>

**Recommendation #5 COMMUNITY**

*“In my experience it seems the biggest sources of unhealthy stress come from parents (and sometimes teachers, counselors, society) about how tough the competition is and how students need to take every possible AP class and do every possible activity to pad their resumes. The message is that there is no room for mistakes and an A is the only acceptable grade.”*

*~ LHS student*

Do we as a community have to simply accept that our children are going to be stressed out and at risk? Or can we do something to address this problem? Do we as a community want to make our youth more resilient? To what extent do we – as parents and as a society – contribute to the culture and climate that creates stress for our children? What do we want to do about it?

There is no doubt that the culture and climate in which our children develop and grow affect their stress levels, as well as their general well-being. The messages and values they receive at

home and around them in the community have a profound effect. The high-achievement culture in Lexington is one of the many influences that affect students. In the YRBS, 81% of students felt pressure from parents to get good grades, and 78% reported that the atmosphere in the town of

Lexington encourages academic competition. This raises many questions for parents, and the community as a whole, to consider: What do we want for our children? What is the effect of parental and society expectations on our youth? How do we balance the pressures of a high-achievement culture with the emotional health of our children? What choices do individual parents need to think about? Parents need to consider these questions for themselves – and the community at large should begin discussions around these complex issues.

One of Lexington’s strengths is that the community has a lot of intelligent people - many of whom are active and concerned citizens – and we should capitalize on this strength to figure out what we can do to make our children more resilient, and less stressed out and at risk.

Let’s make sure that we understand the problem and then let’s identify what we can do – as parents, students, town leaders, educators, and concerned community members.

**Organize community forums and education programs.** We should start with an ongoing series of community forums (conferences, workshops, discussions) where we can come together to become better informed and identify solutions. These forums should be organized by the Committee for Lexington Youth – bringing together the schools, town and community leaders – and co-sponsored by the School Committee and Board of Selectmen. The topics should include the following:

- The results of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey: what do they mean and what can we do about them? (teens, parents, and educators as key participants). Newton initiated a series of “Youth Summits” based on the results of their survey
- Open discussion about “what we want for our children”
- How can we redefine success?
- What is the effect of parental and societal expectations on students?
- What can parents do to reduce stress on their children? How can the schools and community help?

**Recommendation #5**

<b>Community</b>
<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>• open discussion about “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 <b>program coordination</b> among community youth programs, counseling programs, mental health professionals, and faith-based youth groups</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>

- How can parents help their children be more resilient to better cope with the pressures of everyday life? How can the schools and community help?
- How can parents work with teachers to reduce academic stress? What can students do?
- What can the community do to help at-risk youth?
- How do I know whether my child is at risk? And what can I do about it?

These forums and events could be filmed and made available on demand/on line by LexMedia for those who cannot attend the event.

The excellent resources of Lexington Community Education (LCE) should be more fully utilized to educate parents, youth, and the broader community about reducing stress and building resiliency. There should be more speakers like Dr. Robert Brooks, who LCE recently brought to Lexington to speak on building resiliency in youth, and more courses offered on parenting and mindfulness.

**Initiate parenting workshops.** A priority should be parenting workshops focusing specifically on helping parents help their children. For example:

- Needham has annual High School Parent Conferences – organized jointly by the high school and Needham Youth Service -- with workshops like “The Secret Life of Teens – What’s really on your teenager’s mind? “
- Bedford has a Parent Education Series with topics like “Bullying and Cyberbullying: Prevention in Schools and Communities” aimed at elementary school parents.
- Newton has organized a lecture series for parents of teens with topics like “OMG! Your teen actually talks to you?”
- Wakefield has initiated a “Parent University”

The community can also offer wellness programs for parents of adolescents. Newton, for example, has offered a four session program entitled “Taking Care of Ourselves and Our Teens” provided by the Benson-Henry Institute of Mind-Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital.

In mobilizing the community’s resources, the Committee for Lexington Youth should recognize and acknowledge the fine work with youth being done by town agencies such as police, fire, and recreation, as well as the library and faith-based groups such as the Lexington Interfaith Clergy Association. And we urge increased support for coaches and recreation staff in their efforts to build positive relationships with at-risk youth and to relieve unhealthy stress among teens.

**Meeting the needs of the diverse youth population.** Community groups should continue and expand efforts focused on social-emotional and mental health needs of the diverse youth population. For example, the Lexington Asian Mental Health Initiative brought together mental health professionals, parents, town Human Services, town police and resource officers, community organizations, and others in order to organize town-wide community forums on understanding and managing stress for Asian students. Creating coalitions like this are a model for how members of the community can work together to address these issues as a community.

**RECOMMENDATION #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>

Lexington is by no means alone in dealing with the issue of unhealthy stress and youth at risk or working to build the resiliency of their youth. As noted in Recommendation # 3, communities similar to Lexington, like Needham, Newton, Bedford, and Winchester have initiated programs that should be seriously considered in Lexington. This is not to say that we should simply copy these efforts, but we should take advantage of the opportunity to learn from their experiences and apply what would work best in Lexington.

We would encourage the school leader and the Director of Youth Services to reach out to their peers in these communities and perhaps join the information-sharing groups that are operating (e.g. one involving the Directors of Youth Services in Newton and Needham, and neighboring communities).

We recommend joining the “Making Caring Common Project” based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education under the leadership of Dr. Richard Weissbourd. This recently awarded \$2 million grant focuses on strategies for promoting caring, courage, and other key moral and social capacities in both schools and homes. The project will disseminate accessible, easy-to-implement strategies for promoting the awareness of others, and responsibility for others, to parents, educators, and other community members in its network.

There are also organizations like Challenge Success and the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) which have excellent websites and other programs. They provide the results of research that have been incorporated into evidence-based programs.

There are also potential funding sources that could be tapped such as the Community Health Network Area (CHNA) 15, the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. A grant writer – perhaps jointly funded by the schools and the town – should be hired to pursue grants to support Lexington’s efforts to reduce youth stress and build resiliency.

**RECOMMENDATION #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.**

We have endeavored to make these recommendations specific and measurable action steps, but their implementation will require an ongoing process that may well cover several years. To maintain a focus on this implementation over time, we recommend that the School Committee, ideally jointly with the Board of Selectmen, establish a Task Force with members from the School Committee and the Board of Selectmen along with representatives from the schools, town and community, to monitor progress towards the achievement of these recommendations and to make periodic public reports.

## VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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In Town Government and the community, we want to thank Charlotte Rodgers, Director of the Human Services Department, and her staff, Emily Lavine and Matt Ryan for giving of their time, suggestions, and recommendations. We appreciate the feedback from the Youth Services Council, the Human Services Committee, and therapists and community members who responded to our questionnaire.

Finally we would like to thank the youth services staff and board members in other communities, Jon Mattleman, Director of Needham Youth Services; Sue Baldauf, Director of Bedford Youth and Family Services; Jennifer O'Higgins, Director of Youth Services in Newton; and Rebecca Levine, Director, Bekah Epstein, Assistant Director, and Dr. Robin Smith, Board Chair of the Winchester Youth Center, who generously gave of their time and made themselves so available for our questions.

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**Websites:**

Challenge Success <http://www.challengesuccess.org/>

CASAL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) <http://www.casel.org/>

**PBS Documentary:** "Inside the Teenage Brain."

## **IX. AD HOC COMMITTEE FOR YOUTH AT RISK CHARTER**

Members: 14 members (plus 11 organizational liaisons and two liaisons from the School Committee)

Appointed by: School Committee

Length of term: 12 months

Meeting times: As needed

Description: The Committee will address issues concerning Lexington youth, ages 3 - 22, whose mental or physical health is at risk because of stress originating from physical, emotional, social, cultural, and academic sources that may adversely affect them and their families. Youth stress may also be caused by the stressors experienced with education performance expectations, financial issues, job loss, relocation and/or homelessness. Youth may be considered "at risk" because of stress when they or their families experience problems such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, trauma, PTSD, physical or sexual abuse, chronic illness, domestic violence, or feelings of grief/loss.

This is a community public health concern whose solution requires a collaborative approach involving the schools, students, parents, town agencies such as the Health and Human Services/Youth and Family departments, and the broader Lexington community.

The Ad Hoc Committee is charged with recommending policies, goals and programs to address this issue of youth at risk due to stress. These recommendations would be based in part on a review, and evaluation of programs and services that currently exist to support youth and families in Lexington. The committee will address the following issues:

- Review existing public and private programs and services in the community, schools, and town that currently serve youth at risk.
- Identify unmet needs (gaps in services) – including using data from existing surveys, 20/20 Demographic Task Force, Healthy Community Grant Survey from the Board of Health, and interviews with staff.

To address these unmet needs as well as to develop the resiliency of Lexington youth, it will recommend to the School Committee modifications of existing programs and services in the community and schools, or the implementation of new programs and services in the schools, and public or private programs and services in the community.

It will submit interim reports to the School Committee by March 1, 2014 and work to submit a final report by November 2014.