



# Giving Up Homework: Research, Leadership and Change in Massachusetts School

ELIZABETH TRACH

8 minute read

## Summary

What happens when an elementary school adopts a no-homework policy for a year? Students and parents at Estabrook Elementary School in Massachusetts are focusing their after-school learning on independent reading skills.

---

Despite homework being the norm for many elementary school students, there's no consistent or conclusive evidence that written homework boosts achievement for younger students. As more parents grapple with tight schedules and **25 percent of teens struggle with mild to moderate anxiety**, some schools are rising to the challenge of educating the whole child in innovative ways — starting with rethinking the value of homework.

Lexington, Massachusetts is a leafy suburb, 15 miles northwest of Boston. It's an affluent community of about 30,000 people who take pride in their high-performing public schools: When it comes to MCAS scores, **Lexington schools consistently rank near the top** in a state that already **outperforms the rest of the country**.

Despite the success of their schools — or perhaps because of it — parents and teachers recently turned their attention to the social and emotional health of the district's students. By all measures, academic achievement “was working,” explains Jeff LaBroad, assistant principal of Joseph Estabrook Elementary School, one of Lexington's six K–5 schools.


*“The concern became whether students were able to care for themselves as whole people,” he said.*

## The Problem

During the 2015–16 school year, Estabrook Principal Sandra Trach (*no relation to writer*) hosted Sunday afternoon roundtable discussions with parents to discuss the results of the most recent **Youth Risk Behavior Survey**, a questionnaire jointly administered to public high school students by the Massachusetts Department of Education and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Parents and faculty alike were concerned by the high rates of stress reported by Lexington High School students, and many parents expressed frustration about over-scheduling and fatigue with homework.

“What we heard from the community was very clear,” said LaBroad. “They wanted to reduce stress and burnout for their kids.”

In hearing parents’ concerns, Trach and LaBroad realized they might not have the power to alleviate all of the concerns that come with being a parent in the 21st century, but Estabrook could do its part to improve the overall quality of life for its students.



*“I tried to listen for actions that I could take as an elementary principal to lessen that level of stress, and I felt that homework was one step toward that goal,” said Trach.*

Armed with what she heard from parents as well as with input from the School Leadership Team, Trach said she began to work with teachers and parents to craft a plan that responded to the community’s feedback, and took into account her own observations as a principal and the research on learning.

## The Research

Australian professor John Hattie has conducted meta-analyses of educational research for nearly a decade, and in his work has ranked the effectiveness of 195 educational influences based on the results of over 1200 studies. On the **Hattie Ranking’s updated list** of factors that have a positive impact on student achievement, homework comes in at number 120, well below teaching methods like direct instruction and classroom discussion.

In his book “**Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-analyses Relating to**

**Achievement**” Hattie points out that while homework is more effective for high school students than for elementary students, “prescribing homework does not help students develop time management skills” — one of the major reasons many parents and teachers feel that homework is important in the first place.

On the other hand, there’s a **body of evidence gathered over decades** that indicates reading is related to higher student achievement. In particular, **independent reading correlates to academic success**, regardless of the type of reading material students choose for themselves. As Trach and LaBroad worked to develop a new take on homework at Estabrook, the evidence “reinforced to us that reading for pleasure is one of the highest leverage ways to improve learning,” Trach said.

Their thoughtful approach to the research and feedback from parents led Trach to add an important goal to the **2016–2017 School Improvement Plan for Estabrook**: “Focus on decreasing homework and stress, while increasing wellness.”

## **The Policy**

Estabrook’s approach to their new homework goal was two-fold. Careful to make sure that their pilot program was in line with district-wide policies about homework already in place, they announced that there would no longer be regularly assigned *written* homework. This was not an outright ban on homework, and LaBroad notes that students in need of extra help can be assigned “short-term, targeted extra practice” when parents and teachers agree it is necessary. There’s also room in the pilot for at-home projects that involve families and the community.


The second layer to the homework pilot program was nightly reading for pleasure. Whether silent or aloud, alone or with family, students are expected to read each day. There is no reading log or paperwork involved, though — just the encouragement and expectation that families will work toward this new goal.

For enrichment, each grade level also provides a **monthly “at-home learning calendar”** with suggested activities that reinforce learning. The grid is created by classroom teachers as well as specialists like the school librarian and nurse with the goal of offering fun ways to share learning with parents and enhance home-school connections.

# The Leadership

With the School Improvement Plan homework goal in place at the end of the 2015–2016 school year, it fell to Jeff LaBroad to institute the pilot study in September of 2016. Sandra Trach took a year’s leave of absence, and LaBroad took over as principal for the 2016–2017 school year. Though the groundwork was in place, LaBroad knew that community buy-in and confidence were crucial to make the pilot a success.

LaBroad began the school year by setting aside the first two faculty meetings for discussion of the homework pilot. The goal was to be clear and thorough in communicating what the homework pilot was — and what it wasn’t.



*“This wasn’t a homework ban,” said LaBroad. “No one said ‘no,’ but there were lots of questions.”*

After giving faculty a chance to discuss their own feelings about the change, teachers worked to express their concerns and predict the pitfalls they were worried about. To make sure teachers were comfortable communicating the new homework philosophy to parents, LaBroad drew up a set of talking points and crafted a PowerPoint slide for teachers to use at the first open house and in their newsletters to parents.

“Because teachers were supported early on, they became champions” of the pilot program, said LaBroad.

It was critical that parents of Estabrook students understood the new philosophy regarding homework. Rather than having teachers do the heavy lifting of announcing the policy and then fielding questions from confused parents, the policy was communicated in a letter from the main office that everyone received at once. Educators also hosted a series of listening sessions to get feedback and answer parent questions. The homework pilot was a main topic of conversation at a variety of parent meetings, including focus groups and PTO-hosted parent coffees.

The approach seems to have put most people at ease.

“It was too big a shift in philosophy to simply tell the kids one day in class,” said Mark

Taggart, a fourth-grade teacher. “It was communicated to families and community members in a variety of ways over many months, so there was no big reveal. Instead, it was clear that this was a community-wide approach and every stakeholder’s input was sought and valued.”

## The Results

As Estabrook heads into the second year of its two-year homework pilot study this fall, it’s too early to tell if state test results will be up, down or the same for Estabrook students. Massachusetts is in the process of updating its statewide test to **MCAS 2.0**; the scores due to be released in autumn of 2017 will serve as a new baseline for future testing but cannot be compared to previous PARCC or MCAS scores, making it difficult for Estabrook administrators to use it as a way to measure the success of the homework pilot.

In the meantime, LaBroad explains that they’ll look at report card standards and begin studying changes across cohorts. He’s particularly interested in whether they’ll see an impact as the fifth graders who were part of the first year of the pilot enter middle school.

The other major measures of success to date are teacher and parent reports. Fifth-grade teacher Ellen Silberman says that overall the program “a win.” “I noticed more playdates after school last year. My students are less stressed, and the families also seem less stressed.” On the academic front, she remarks that she has seen “no big difference in performance.”

Silberman is also enthusiastic about the pilot’s effect on class time. Because students are completing assignments in class instead of at home, they’re getting more supervised instruction — and less help from parents on their work.

The drawback to not sending homework home, however, is that many parents felt that they weren’t as well informed about what was happening in classrooms on a daily basis. This concern was brought up in parent-teacher conferences and parent coffees, and a **parent survey about the pilot** revealed that 87 percent of parents agreed that written homework of the past was an important method of communication. Similarly, 39 percent of parents felt less informed about what their children had learned now that written homework wasn’t in place.

To address this concern, Estabrook will continue to encourage families to use the monthly at-home learning calendars as a way to start conversations about what students are doing in the

classroom. LaBroad also addressed this concern by adding a goal to the **2017–2018 School Improvement Plan** aimed at examining home–school communication as a whole and finding ways to keep parents informed in the digital age.

Despite lingering concerns about communication, the survey revealed that more than half of Estabrook parents felt they had more family time together and that their children had more time for unstructured play than they did before the pilot. Sara Cuthbertson says that her daughter was an unenthusiastic reader when it came to filling out a nightly reading log. The shift to no written homework changed her relationship to reading.

Cuthbertson shares the story of her daughter’s change of heart when it comes to reading, saying, “A few months in, she and a few of her peers started a recess book club that continues a year later. They frequently journal about books that they are reading and share recommendations with their friends, often passing books between them until every child has had a chance to enjoy a particular favorite.”

Gretchen Reisig agrees that the pilot has been helpful to her fifth–grade son.

Early in the year, Reisig discovered that her son had not quite mastered his math facts. Because he wasn’t saddled with other written homework assignments, he had plenty of time to review math and catch up to his peers.

“It allowed our son to have some flexibility in his learning, whether we asked the teacher for some reinforcement or we found some supplements online or in a workbook,” said Reisig.” Once he was caught up, no written homework allowed my child to spend more time enjoying the evening.”

## **The Takeaway**

Homework has been a tradition in schooling for so long that it’s often hard for parents and teacher to imagine life without it. Making such a fundamental change to any organization is difficult, but a few things stand out in making Estabrook’s pilot one that the community feels good about.

First, administrators made the change in response to parent concerns about student wellness.

Second, they acted based on the guidance from educational research, but they didn't act unilaterally. Trach and LaBroad were careful to involve all stakeholders and to give both teachers and parents the information they needed to move forward. Finally, the leadership at Estabrook remains committed to listening to feedback and making adjustments as required.

This healthy attitude toward change is a part of the culture of the school, and that makes a big difference when it comes to moving forward with new policies.

"Estabrook is a community that embraces innovative thinking and the opportunity to grow," says LaBroad.

With plans to continue gathering data and feedback about the pilot already in place, it's clear that Estabrook will continue doing what they've been doing: making informed decisions and keeping the lines of communication open to best serve their students' needs.

*Elizabeth Trach is a professional writer and editor with 18 years of classroom teaching experience in both Spanish and English language arts. In addition to working with students from kindergarten through college, she also design curriculum and original teaching units. When she's not in front of the computer, you can find her at work in the garden or singing in a band. You can follow her adventures at her blog, [Port Potager](#), or connect on her [website](#).*



[ABOUT US](#) [K-12 TRENDS](#) [MOVING TO DIGITAL](#) [TEACHING & LEARNING](#) [SAVED CONTENT](#)

