

South Brunswick School District

Research Project in Support of the Rethinking Homework District Goal

**An Executive Summary
June 2017**



I like the teacher who gives you something to think about besides homework.

~Lily Tomlin

South Brunswick School District

Research Project in Support of the Rethinking Homework Goal

This document serves as a “white paper” that memorializes the approach that the South Brunswick School District (SBSD) took in its 2-year study of the complex topic of homework. The report includes the reason homework became an area for study in SBSB during the 2014-2017 school years, along with the goals that were set forth, the research that ensued, the findings that were gleaned and the recommendations that resulted. The intent of this paper is to help readers understand the issue, the steps taken, and the final outcomes.

WHY

By State mandate, SBSB reviews its curriculum on a 5-year curriculum revision cycle. This includes examination of content, instructional approaches, resources, assessment practices, and reflection on how we are addressing the NJ Student Learning Standards and preparing students for future life and learning.

While the review cycle has historically been a comprehensive process, homework practices were not an intentional component. We recognized this as an unintended omission. So this, along with the growing parental concern being expressed at parent and Board meetings regarding HW and stress, led us to the decision to take a closer look at homework practices in SBSB-- and to do so through various lenses.

BACKGROUND

Beginning in Fall 2014, the South Brunswick High School (SBHS) Site Council raised parent concerns regarding the stress students were experiencing as related to the amount of HW students received. Throughout the year, the topic of HW was discussed at the SBHS Leadership Team, where we determined the need to do our “homework” on the topic of HW. During the May 2015 SBSB Convocation to establish District Goals, we identified “rethinking our homework practices” as a necessary goal. We developed a District Homework Committee to examine our homework practices, research “best practices,” and gather data to inform our thinking about homework.

During our first committee meeting, we reviewed the District Goal and developed an action plan which included conducting a book study; developing and implementing parent, student and teacher surveys; shadowing students in the middle and high schools to experience a “day in the lives”; interviewing students in a focus group; and gathering practices currently implemented by surrounding school districts. The committee met monthly and posted articles and video clips in a Google Classroom for online sharing by committee members between meetings. As the year progressed, the HW Committee consulted with the Mental Health and Wellness Committee, as there was a realization that both committees were addressing similar themes of student stress and anxiety.

Throughout our study, data gathering, and research, we considered two aspects of homework: value and appropriateness.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Based on the above, we conducted research and inquiry to answer two broad primary questions as we examined our homework practices:

- What is the value of homework in South Brunswick School District?
- How much homework is appropriate at each grade and ability level?

DISTRICT HOMEWORK GOALS

The District Goals referenced earlier in this report were written as follows for the school years 2015-2016 and 2016-2017. The first year was one of study and research; the second year was one of action.

Homework Goal Statement 2015-2016

By June of 2016, we will review our homework practices, define homework and its purpose, and make recommendations based on our study of current research and *Rethinking Homework* by Cathy Vatterott.

Homework Goal Statement 2016-2017

Based on the findings from the 2015-2016 SBSB homework study, we will identify short and long-term action steps that we will operationalize during the 2016-17 school year. These steps will include the following:

- Aligning grading practices 5-12
- Setting of fluid but smart boundaries on homework
- Identifying ways in which Google Classroom can be used consistently and effectively to improve student success while reducing student stress
- Based on the book study of Cathy Vatterott's *Rethinking Homework: Best Practices that Support Diverse Needs*, identifying and sharing additional best practices
- Engaging staff in PD and discussions around the embedding of identified and valued best practices into the school day (e.g. self-regulation strategies, technology solutions, etc.)
- Implementing 2-4 district-wide, family-friendly occasions that shift the focus from IQ to EQ

DISTRICT GOAL COMMITTEE

The HW Goal Committee took root with a core set of members.

It was a broad-based group that included representation from all levels (elementary, middle and high), and staff including teachers, supervisors, program directors, building administration, central administration and the superintendent. From the onset, there was also SBEA representation, Board member representation, and parent representation. Ad hoc members joined the committee at various junctures. Students were added to the committee during the last year.

Each member brought a unique perspective and was value-added.

HISTORIANS

The written record of what transpired during the two-year period of the Homework Goal was compiled, transcribed, drafted and finalized by the following writers and contributors:

- Co-chair: April Gonzalez, SBHS Assistant Principal
- Co-chair: Peter Varela, SBHS Principal
- Admin Support: Amanda Rosenberg, Director of Professional Development
- Admin Support: Heidi Carlson Henning, Administrative Intern
- Admin Support: Joanne Kerekes, Assistant Superintendent

RESEARCH PROCESS¹

A five-pronged approach to research was developed and implemented: (A) Study of the literature related to homework including a book study on *Rethinking Homework* by Cathy Vatterott; (B) Survey of stakeholders to gather quantitative data regarding homework practices and perceptions in the SBSD; (C) Shadow project as a means of gathering qualitative data to provide a more holistic picture of homework in the life of students in the middle and high school in SBSD; (D) Review of the HS Course Booklet; and (E) Review of the SBSD Homework Policy.

RESEARCH & INQUIRY: FINDINGS

(A) LITERATURE REVIEW

Rethinking Homework by Cathy Vatterott was selected for book study. Chosen for its comprehensiveness, the book examined homework from a variety of angles including the “cult” or culture of homework, and the research and common sense behind assigning homework. In addition, it looked at the role of homework in the context of the family and offered effective homework practices and strategies to support students in homework completion.

Our Findings: Myths and Truths

- *There are myths including...*
 - *Doing homework helps students to keep a competitive edge.*
 - *The more homework, the more rigor.*
 - *Homework builds time management skills. (It’s actually more like housekeeping.)*
 - *All AP classes have excessive homework.*
- *There are truths including...*
 - *Homework is not a one-size-fits-all.*
 - *Homework that is realistic, purposeful, meaningful, and relevant has a place for learning.*
 - *Homework can impact passion for and love of learning either positively or negatively - depending on the quality of the homework assigned.*
 - *The way homework is approached can inspire a love of learning or deflate it.*

Our Suggestions

- *Develop district-wide agreements that include the following:*
 - *Re-define homework in SBSD.*
 - *Develop a common understanding/set of beliefs about homework and its purpose.*
 - *Revisit reasons for assigning homework.*
 - *Identify the merits of homework.*
 - *Establish times that would be deemed “No Homework” periods.*
- *Provide Professional Development on topics that include the following:*
 - *Self-regulation Homework Practices*
 - *Student do as much practice as needed*
 - *Greater flexibility and student choice*
 - *Grace period for due dates*
 - *Purpose of Homework*
 - *Debating, “Does the type/amount of homework support the purpose?”*

¹ Our research protocols are included in the Appendix section of this report

- *Communicating the purpose of homework with both parents and students.*
- *Making homework relevant and meaningful based on the purpose.*
- *Thinking about extrinsic vs. intrinsic motivation as it relates to homework.*
- *Identify and routinely share current SBSB “best practices” related to homework by facilitating sessions such as the following:*
 - *Discussion and reflection on the homework currently being assigned- vertically and horizontally*
 - *Sharing of examples of purposeful and meaningful homework in job-alike groups*
 - *Application of understanding of differentiated instruction to homework*
 - *Discussion on “What is ‘overload’ and do we regularly ‘take the temperature’ in our classrooms?”*

(B) QUANTITATIVE DATA: SURVEYS OF STAKEHOLDERS

Survey research was used to solicit opinion and sentiment from three stakeholder groups: students in grades 5-12; middle, high and upper elementary staff; and parents of secondary and upper elementary students. Questions were designed to extract quantitative data based on the amount of homework, reasons for assigning homework, time it was taking students to complete homework (from varied perspectives), and impact of homework on life outside school. There were closed- and open- ended responses.

Summary of Findings

Parent Surveys

- *31.5% of HS students have 90+ min of homework (HW) daily*
- *20.3% of MS students have 90+ minutes of HW daily*

High School Comments:

- *No HW over breaks or long weekends*
- *Homework clubs*
- *Less group work*
- *Teach students how to plan/manage time*
- *Too many assessments/assignments on same days*
- *Quality of homework*
- *Inconsistent between same classes with different teachers*

Middle School Comments:

- *Very long written papers (20-40 pages)*
- *Difficult to get homework when absent*
- *Inconsistent homework practices*
- *Teachers need to give more feedback on assignments*
- *Give more independent reading*
- *Transition between Elementary to Middle difficult*
- *Homework reviewed in class*
- *After school help/homework clubs*

Teacher Surveys (Grades 5-12)

- *Most teachers who completed the survey were HS teachers*
- *Highest department response was Special Education*
- *50 teachers taught Honors/AP*
- *59 teachers taught Academic Level*
- *103 teachers taught Regular Level*

- 33% of teachers expect students to spend 20-30 minutes on HW nightly for their class.
- 18% of teachers expect students to spend more than 40 minutes on HW nightly for their class.
- 50% of teachers expect students to spend less than 20 minutes on HW nightly for their class.
- Top reasons for assigning HW: reinforce/practice skills, check for understanding, review for test.
- 24 of teachers surveyed assign HW because there is not enough time in class.
- Top response for why students do not complete HW: "Students are unmotivated."
- 70% of teachers surveyed reported they differentiate HW assignments.
- 84% of teachers surveyed believe the amount of HW students are assigned should stay the same.
- 15% of teachers surveyed believe the amount of HW students are assigned should decrease.
- 54% of Honors/Advanced Level teachers assign HW 3 or more nights.
- Less than 1% of Honors/Advanced level teachers expect students to spend 60 minutes on HW nightly for their class.
- Less than 1% of Honors/Advanced teachers believe the amount of HW students are assigned should decrease.

Student Surveys

Sentiment

- 50% of HS students report they receive "too much" HW.
- 31% of MS students report they receive "too much" HW.
- 67% of 5th grade students report they receive "too much" HW.

Amount

- Average amount of time spent on HW on a school night (Sunday-Thursday) at the HS:
 - 8.8%- less than 30 minutes
 - 18.2%- 30-60 minutes
 - 26.2%- 60-90 minutes
 - 20.7%- 90-120 minutes
 - 26.2%- More than 120 minutes
- HS Students report most HW is assigned in ELA classes.
- 5th grade students report most HW is assigned in math classes.

Timing

- 85% of HS students report teachers have assigned HW over holidays.
- 69% of MS students report teachers have assigned HW over holidays.
- 32% of 5th grade students report teachers have assigned HW over holidays.

Impact

- 60% of HS students report HW has caused them to not participate in extracurricular activities.
- 40% of MS students report HW has caused them to not participate in extracurricular activities.
- 28% of 5th graders report HW has caused them to not participate in extracurricular activities.

Comments

- The large majority of HS student comments express concern over the impact of the homework load (stress, sleep, ability to participate in other activities).

- *Many HS students feel that teachers do not communicate with one another regarding tests/HW, and therefore, students get overwhelmed.*
- *The higher level of executive functioning/self-regulation skills a student has, the more successful he/she is with managing and completing homework.*
- *The more a student procrastinates, the more stressed he/she is.*

(C) QUALITATIVE DATA (SHADOW PROJECT)

To supplement and round out the data that was collected in a quantitative manner, we decided to conduct a qualitative study that would enable us to look for trends in the way our MS and HS students were “experiencing” school each day-- with a particular focus on the stress levels. We used a slice protocol, and literally sliced out a day in the life of students who represented a cross section of our student population. Called the *Shadow Project*, we “shadowed” 40 HS students and 7 MS students, analyzed collected notes, and looked for trends that might inform our work.

Trends Observed:

- *Sitting too long and tired- 17 students*
- *Start later- 6 students*
- *Locker Use- 3 students do not have time*
- *Homework and Studying- Studying not viewed the same*
- *Students in and out of restroom*
- *Students do use HAP to work on homework and use it effectively*
- *Many teachers allow students time in class to begin homework*
- *Self-imposed racial segregation (or directed by parents to segregate)*
- *Felt like “Two schools under one roof.” - A. Gonzalez*
- *Extracurricular Activities- Many students are involved*
- *Extracurricular Activities- Some communicated that these activities impact their schedules.*

- *Clear correlation between the class levels and students’ stress levels*

- *AP/Honors students experience higher stress levels*
- *AP/Honors students report limited sleep*
- *AP/Honors students report self-imposed pressures versus external pressures*
- *It was observed in AP/Honors classes that assessment drives learning*
- *Majority of class time in AP/Honors classes is stationary for students*

- *Academic students reported outside-of-school pressures*
- *Academic students reported feeling comfort in their class level*
- *Academic classes exhibited lower rigor*
- *Academic students exhibited compliant behaviors*

- *Regular/SE students reported having plenty of time for HW via HAP and/or class time*
- *Regular/SE students exhibited lowest levels of stress*
- *Regular/SE students expressed comfort with the work load*
- *Regular/SE students exhibited lower rates of class participation*
- *Regular/SE consisted of a more diverse population*
- *Regular/SE classes exhibited the lowest levels of expectations/rigor*
- *Regular/SE students were seated for entire block*

- *All- trend noted that students do not use locker*
- *All- lack of schedule balance (one day is harder than the other)*
- *All- classes are primarily teacher-directed*

How the stress level was rated from the shadowing:

| <u>Category</u> | <u>Students</u> | <u>Classes</u> |
|---|---|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Highly stressed</i> | <i>1 student</i> | <i>AP student</i> |
| <i>Moderately stressed by dealing with it</i> | <i>9 students</i> | <i>AP, H, Academic, Spec. Ed.</i> |
| <i>Minimally stressed, or not addressed</i> | <i>35 students</i> | <i>Range</i> |
| <i>Not mentioned</i> | <i>2 students</i> | |
| <i>Or externally stressed</i> | <i>11 students (overall with above numbers)</i> | |

D. COURSE BOOKLET AND SUMMER ASSIGNMENT DATA COLLECTION

SUMMER ASSIGNMENT ANALYSIS

Data was collected on the amount of summer work being assigned, the time in which it had to be done, and the nature of the assignments. The range of summer hours went from 50+ in English per course to 0 in Music Theory. There was a variation among some teachers of the same course.

SUMMER ASSIGNMENTS IN COURSE BOOKLET

During review of the HS course booklet, there was no indication of the approximate time a summer assignment would take. In Social Studies the nature of the summer assignments was provided with consistency. (Example: AP US History- There will be a summer assignment requiring readings from a textbook, an outside book and an historical article, and an essay about colonial America. Note: A.P. U.S. History will fulfill the graduation requirement for U.S. History.) In other areas there was either no mention of the summer assignment or it was more vague. (Example: AP Art History- Homework is extensive. Students will be required to complete a summer reading assignment.)

AP COURSE SELECTION

In the course booklet, there is no general statement regarding AP course selection and no limit to the number a student may take. There is no district position regarding course selection. There are two Overview Statements: Math: Taking summer math courses for advancement is not a recommended practice; and Science: Students who do not complete summer assignments for AP courses will not be allowed to take the course, even if they met prerequisites and were originally placed in the course.

EXPECTATION FOR AP EXAM

In the course booklet, there are variances in language regarding expectations for the taking of AP exams. Examples: (1) AP Physics I prepares students to take the Advanced Placement Examination, which all students are required to take. (2) Computer Science- The course will be taught with the expectation that students will take the AP Computer Science exam. (3) English- Students enrolled in this course are encouraged to take the Advanced Placement Examination in Literature and Composition. (4) Business: All students who complete this course will be well prepared for the AP Microeconomics exam in May. (5) AP Environ Science- The course's major topics define the scope of both the course and the AP exam. (6) AP Music theory- no mention

AP COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

There is a range of AP course descriptions in the course booklet that spans from an “extremely challenging and rigorous college-level course” to an “introductory course.” There does not appear to be articulation across departments.

(E) REVIEW OF SBSB HOMEWORK POLICY

The policy below exists but few were aware of it, and it had not been published or shared with staff and parents in any of the routine publications. There was fidelity to the policy and the language withstood the test of time-- but does need to be refreshed to reflect current disposition and beliefs.

There is a set of informal guidelines (10 minutes per grade level) but this has not been formally adopted, and it still lacks clarity for the high school.

SOUTH BRUNSWICK SCHOOL DISTRICT HOMEWORK POLICY #2330

Section: Program

Date Created: December 2011

Date Edited: December 2011

Adopted: 19 December 2011

The South Brunswick Board of Education considers homework to be a valuable extension of instruction. It gives pupils the opportunity to review and practice, to expand ideas and to explore new concepts without the pressure of time. Homework is the bridge between home and school that allows parent(s) or legal guardian(s) to play a more active and informed role in their child’s education.

The following are six basic district assumptions about homework:

- 1. Homework assignments should be meaningful/purposeful and reinforce what is being taught.*
- 2. Every effort should be made by the teacher to assure that the pupils understand assignments. Teachers should model how homework should be done and make expectations clear.*
- 3. Materials that are necessary to complete assignments should be readily available.*
- 4. The pupil should complete most assignments by working independently. Some assignments may be given which require the parent(s) or legal guardian(s) and child to work together.*
- 5. Homework is differentiated to meet the needs of the learner.*
- 6. Homework will not be punitive.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on its inquiry, research and analysis, the committee puts forth the following recommendations for implementation in the 2016-2017 school year.

1. SBSB Policy #2330 and Guidelines

- Raise awareness of current policy through reissue to staff and parents. Review annually.
- Review annually and revise policy to reflect current practice and beliefs.
 - Stress purposefulness and relevancy
 - Maintain sensitivity around trips, concerts, illness, religious recognitions, etc.
- Review, reaffirm and revise guidelines based on the premise that homework should be differentiated for students' ability, interests, learning style, and developmental needs as well as chronological age*.
- Institute "Homework-free Holidays." Three done seasonally in 2016-2017, with possible expansion in 2017-2018.
- Ensure the policies/agreements/guidelines/HW Holidays are being followed with fidelity

2. Consistency and Transparency

- Based on study of courses that carry summer assignments, take the following actions:
 - Ensure full transparency in course booklet.
 - Note time commitments in the course booklet.
 - Note the nature of summer assignments.
 - Teachers of the same course will establish a consistent agreement- not to exceed 5 hrs.
 - Summer assignments for any course will not exceed 40 hours.
- Based on review of HS Course Selection Booklet, take the following actions:
 - District recommendation- students take no more than two AP courses per school year.
 - Parents will be required to sign/acknowledge a waiver when AP course selection exceeds this number.
 - The district position will be made clear.
 - The responsibility for final decision will rest with parents and students.
 - AP Exam: Consistent, articulated language and expectations (across content)
 - AP/Honors Rigor: Consistent, articulated language and expectations (across content)
- Look at English Department homework specifically

***Note:**

The most comprehensive research on homework to date comes from a 2006 meta-analysis by Duke University psychology professor Harris Cooper, who found evidence of a positive correlation between homework and student achievement, meaning students who did homework performed better in school. The correlation was stronger for older students—in seventh through 12th grade—than for those in younger grades, for whom there was a weak relationship between homework and performance.

Cooper's analysis focused on how homework impacts academic achievement—test scores, for example. His report noted that homework is also thought to improve study habits, attitudes toward school, self-discipline, inquisitiveness and independent problem solving skills. On the other hand, some studies he examined showed that homework can cause physical and emotional fatigue, fuel negative attitudes about learning and limit leisure time for children. At the end of his analysis, Cooper recommended further study of such potential effects of homework.

3. Provide ongoing Professional Development (Best Homework Practices)

- Assignment based on learning targets
- Differentiation of homework
- Due date flexibility
- Increased opportunity for self-regulated HW and choice
- Embed into New Staff Training
- Consider viewing of *Race to Nowhere* with staff

4. Provide opportunity for ongoing Parent and Student Conversations

- Viewing of *Race to Nowhere* (2 part) with moderated discussions with parents and students
- Offer other shared viewings on similar topics (HW, stress, etc.)
- Offer specific targeted SBPA workshops such as Self-Regulation, Mindfulness, Change
- Hold Homework Symposium (Spring 2017) to close-out the HW goal
- Establish annual meeting of Homework Committee with broad involvement of stakeholders

5. Build student responsibility for learning

- Teach students how to create goals, manage time, monitor time
- Teach students how to incorporate brain breaks at home
- Teach students how to do homework (not just study for tests)

6. Keep a focus on related Mental Wellness

- Allow for more flexibility of expectations when a student's mental health becomes negatively impacted
- Summer Institute: Build in a longer "brain break" mid-morning

7. Topics for Further Deliberation (symposium and beyond)

- Compulsory study hall
- Open time in HS schedule (a few minutes off of each class) to allow for time to engage in mindfulness; socialization; discretionary time, etc.
- Open time in MS schedule (a few minutes off of each class) to allow for time to engage in mindfulness; socialization, discretionary time, etc.
- HAPs that are not really help and access periods. Can we hold 30 minutes sacred?
- New thinking about homework practices-- ungraded; choice; P/F
- Opportunities for Yoga, Mindfulness, etc. for students (embedded wellness)

HOMEWORK SYMPOSIUM: CULMINATING EVENT

On May 30, 2017, the HW Committee held its final event of the year. This was conducted in conjunction with the SBSB Parent Academy. The purpose of this symposium was to discuss topics associated with homework and stress and potentially derive recommendations that would improve the educational experience for our students.

The format for the evening was a full group gathering for an overview and review of the work done to-date. Following this, participants (including staff, students, parents, Board members, and administration) moved into Break Out Groups where open-ended discussion took place. Notes from these discussions as well as from the “exit slip” are included in the appendix.

GOAL AND ACTION PLAN SUMMARY

The following statements encapsulate and summarize the work done by the Homework Committee over the course of its two-year study and subsequent recommendations and actions.

ACTIONS TAKEN

As a result of this research process, the committee completed these action steps in 2015-2017.

- ☞ Ran a research-based book study and identified HW myths/truths
- ☞ Conducted research (quantitative and qualitative) and analyzed data for truths and trends
- ☞ Collected data regarding summer assignments and studied results
- ☞ Conducted review of HS course booklet and analyzed findings
- ☞ Reviewed the SBSB HW Policy and guidelines
- ☞ Linked with Mental Wellness & Vertical Articulation Goals

NOTEWORTHY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Based on the findings from the above, the committee and the administrative team in SBSB accomplished the following in 2015-2017.

- ☞ Reissued the SBSB HW policy and HW guidelines
- ☞ Developed consistent agreements regarding summer assignments
- ☞ Revised and posted a transparent, articulated HS Course Booklet
- ☞ Instituted district-wide HW Free Holidays
- ☞ Hosted two Parent Academies- Race to Nowhere (two part viewing and moderated discussion) & Homework Symposium
- ☞ Provided staff with professional development on the Best Practices regarding homework
- ☞ Created 2 multi-media presentations: HW Pecha Kucha and Under Pressure
- ☞ Published the SBSB White Paper (executive summary)

FUTURE PLANS

- ☞ Routine professional development embedded in New Staff Training and in our annual PD series of workshops
- ☞ Annual meeting of a Homework Oversight Committee– a touchstone that ensures that the “goal lives on”—including discussion about some of the promising practices that emerged from the HW Symposium, May 2017

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

The 2-year District Homework Goal formally concluded on June 31, 2017.

While the action plan came to an end, the conversation has not. If the recommendations included in this report are approached with fidelity in our schools and classrooms, the discussion from here on out should be one of “monitor, review and adjust.”

The foundation for a systematic approach to homework is solidly in place and rests on the two essential questions that formed the basis for the two-year study: *What is the value of homework in South Brunswick School District?* *How much homework is appropriate at each grade and ability level?*

APPENDIX

OUR PROTOCOLS

A. Book Study - Rethinking Homework by Cathy Vatterott

Chapters 1-3

Book Discussion Protocol, *The Four A's*

What Assumptions does the author of the text hold?

What do you agree with in the text?

What do you want to argue with in the text?

What aspirations do you have that relate to the text?

Chapters 4-5

Book Discussion Protocol, *The Last Word Protocol*

Summary of the Protocol:

Participants silently identify significant ideas (3-5 minutes) in the text. During the first round of sharing, one group member shared his/her significant idea but does not elaborate on it. The other participants each have one minute to agree, disagree, and raise a question or comment. The first participant has two minutes to respond and build on what others in the group have said-thereby getting the “last word.” This can be repeated for several rounds until the discussion is exhausted or time frame has been reached.

B. Survey: Research Questions

1. What is our purpose in assigning homework?
2. What are the cumulative time expectations placed on children in grades 5-12 and at all academic levels beyond those hours spent in school?
 - a. How do teachers, students, parents and guardians view this amount of time and its impact on the students?
3. Is the homework we assign rigorous, relevant and realistic?
4. What kind of homework yields the greatest results in learning?
5. How do we use homework formatively, to help students learn?
6. How are we differentiating homework to meet students' needs?

C. Shadowing Project: Research Questions

What “messaging” do students receive about homework and their academic trajectories within a typical school day in South Brunswick?

- a. Who provides this feedback and in what contexts?
- b. What is the tone and tenor of this messaging?
- c. How do students make meaning of these messages and how do they inform their state of mind?

Research Model: Shadowing Project:

As part of the research and learning about homework practices in our district, we consulted with Dr. Sharon Ravitch from the University of Pennsylvania to guide us in a Shadowing Project to expand our research beyond traditional surveys. We combined forces and joined with members of the Mental Health and Wellness Committee to research and learn more about how our students experience school and learning in South Brunswick.

The design of the project involved two *Shadowing Days* at the high school to serve the purpose of collecting qualitative data about how our students experience a day at South Brunswick High School. We repeated the project at Crossroads Middle School on February 29, 2016. We typically think of research in terms of collecting *quantitative data*. (Our surveys accomplished this.) Although it is complicated to collect *qualitative data*, this kind of data can provide rich, in-depth information that would help us collect well-rounded facts and records for analysis. After two instructional sessions with Dr. Sharon Ravitch, an expert in the field of qualitative data, we designed the following plan, which was shared with all faculty, for shadowing students and collecting data.

Student Selection Process for Shadowing Project:

Working with Susana Nikitczuk, SBHS Assistant Principal, and Crossroads MS leadership, we created a cohort that mirrors our student population: approximately 65% percent non-white, approximately 50% Indian/Asian, approximately 60% taking multiple Honors/AP classes, approximately 10% students with IEPs, etc. Grades 8-12 were studied. At the high school, 40 students were shadowed over the course of two days. At the Crossroads South Middle School, 7 students were shadowed.

Shadowers:

Volunteers who represent Central Office Administrators, Middle School and High School Administrators, Supervisors, Teachers, Counselors, and Association Representatives.

What:

Shadowers were each assigned a student to follow for the day. Approximately 50 students, who represent our student population (grade, ethnicity, gender, etc.) were identified to participate. Shadowers took notes using a protocol provided by Dr. Ravitch during training. This involved mostly scripting as well as identifying themes/trends. The focus was on the students' experiences. (We attempted to perceive through the eyes and ears of our students.) As opportunity presented itself, during lunch and walking through hallways, we posed questions to the students aimed at checking for our understanding of their experience and feelings regarding homework and stress. This allowed us to gain a deeper insight into the students' perspectives. Teachers did not receive any written feedback, as visits to classrooms were not to be evaluative.

When:

South Brunswick High School: B-Day, February 17, 2016 and A-Day, February 18, 2016.
Crossroads Middle School: February 29, 2016

Where:

Classrooms-- as per students' schedules, lunchrooms, hallways.

Why:

We committed ourselves to a methodical and comprehensive study of how our students' experience school. This qualitative research is not dissimilar to the kind of action research many of us have conducted in our classrooms in order to gain knowledge and understanding of how students learn. Shadowing, as it was planned and executed, served as a systematic way to gather information about how our students experience learning, to analyze our findings, and to develop recommendations that will effect positive change.

Data Analysis Protocol

Step 1: Groupings

Grouping Part A - AP/Honors students, Academic students and Regular/Special Education students, and Grouping Part B- Gender and Ethnicity. Group Formation- Form 3 groups to review the data according to academic levels noted in Part A.

Roles- Identify the following roles: Facilitator, Timekeeper, and Note-Taker

Step 2: Major Themes

Teams begin to share out and take notes of the major themes. This should be done deliberately- not hastily. Our goal would be to do a theme sharing for perhaps 20 minutes.

Step 3: Noting Themes

Each of the groups will have board space, and a couple people per group will go to the board and write down the themes that emerged. It's ok to truncate language. For example: *competition ubiquitous, or language of AP/assessment constant.*

Step 4: Coding Ethnicity

The largest ethnicity (Asian) will have no color-coding provided to that cohort. However, black, white, and Latino students are underlined with a unique color. *Supplies:* an array of pens that are black, blue, and green

Step 5: Through Lines

We will look at the board and discover *through lines*. With the red pen we begin encasing themes that cut across academic groups, ethnicities, and gender. If there is one about homework, that gets encased in circles. If there is one about lack of sleep, that gets encased in a square. A third might get a parallelogram. And so on. Ideally, we get this posted on the board and considered in 45 minutes or so.

Step 6: Narratives

Begin to read the narratives, and we do so with the advantage of having some themes identified. Share out in our small groups, and determine if new themes are emerging, existing themes are being extended, or existing themes are being fully reinforced. It should be mostly the second and third option, if the researcher captured the right themes, but sometimes a different, more dispassionate reader can surface new information.

Step 7: Steering Committee

At this point, we take stock of time and energy in the room, perhaps dismiss the volunteers who helped, and a steering committee sets a 2nd date to reconcile all that was said and heard, and ultimately settle on what this research project taught us. We keep everything safe and nearby, including jottings.

Step 8: Small Group Reconvenes- Further study and analysis of data collected.

D. Course Booklet Review and Summer Assignment Information Gathering

A review of the High School Course Booklet was conducted. The review targeted the following components-- especially with regard to advanced courses (AP and Honors)-- all looked at with an eye towards transparency and consistency.

- Summer assignments
- Course selection process
- Expectations for AP exam
- Course descriptions

In addition, a survey was conducted of all advanced classes that carried summer work to determine the nature of the assignments and duration of each.

E. Policy Review

A review of the SBSB Homework Policy #2330 was conducted. The review was focused on currency (relationship to practice), relevancy and clarity.

F. SBPA HW Symposium Exit Slips

What follows is a summary of five breakout group responses. These responses should be fodder for future discussions regarding HW practices.

1. *HW Practices That Cause a Mind-shift Group*
2. *Mindfulness Group*
3. *Master Schedule Group*
4. *All Things AP Group*
5. *A Question of Time Group*

HW Practices That Cause a Mind-shift Group

Participants had a choice of selecting whether or not they are a “District Employee, “Elem” Parent, Etc. Next steps/suggestions you would like us to consider:

- Elem: Ungraded HW through Grade 5.
- Elem: How to help your child plan and self-regulate their responsibility (Elem and Middle).
- Elem: Many good practices in place already...time to refine.
- Elem: More structured HW.
- Elem: Cannot swing pendulum too much and have little to no HW. There should be HW and reinforce skills.
- Middle: Realized there is HW everyday with some support.
- Middle: Student choice approach and not grade HW.
- Middle: Choice of HW and students need training to understand benefits of HW.
- Middle/High: Grading and HW should be more consistent across teachers - should not depend on teacher (2).
- High: Student choice approach and not grade HW.
- High: Prioritize HW.
- District: When given a choice or long-term projects, how do you manage your time?
- District: Give flexibility to complete the HW.
- District: Conversations across district K-12 levels.
- District: Continue to evaluate HW practices.

- District: PD on how to teach students to Self-Regulation/Differentiation (2).
- District: It is not one size fits all. Provide different HW - easy middle high. Ungraded but complete.

Most important “take away” away for you:

- Teaching students the executive functioning skills at all levels including calendar use and tech.
- Elementary prepares middle school students to deal with responsibility of completing assignments.
- Time for staff discussion: What do we believe? What can we not agree to? Can we tiptoe into change? How can we tie this to Self Regulation and Exec Functioning?
- Is elementary doing enough to prepare/arm students with the Executive Functioning skills necessary for work given at the middle and high school?
- Parents need to know what is going on in school.
- We need to change some HW practices to make study enjoyable for the students.
- As a teacher, what is the purpose of HW? We need to talk about this.
- I like the idea someone brought up where another district is utilizing HW as an incentive, not to penalize. Would like to see where or if SB takes this or looks further into it. A follow up or next meeting to see next steps.
- Interesting disconnect between middle/high school level of HW.
- Need more of these discussions and need to be careful about going to the extreme with too little or no HW.
- This is complicated. Shifting HW practices alone is difficult without larger systemic shifts in our approach to schooling and grades.
- They need Self-Reg. (3)
- Understand student feelings to make kids best in their career.

Mindfulness Group

Participants had a choice of selecting whether or not they are a “District Employee, “Elem” Parent, Etc. Next steps/suggestions you would like us to consider:

- Elem: Mindful coaching
- Elem: Make HW more meaningful and differentiated.
- Elem: Incorporate more mindfulness into the school day. Give activities (3)
- Elem: Make assignments that allow students to teach their parents about mindfulness.
- High: More teacher communication on HW.
- High: Too much work thrown on the kids at once. The teachers should have conversations and make it more practical and doable.
- District: Teachers should focus on quality of HW, not quantity. Give HW that stretches across days. (3)
- District: More district-wide sharing of mindfulness and activities.

Most important “take away” away for you:

- Mindful activities for HW (6)
- Mindfulness is happening in our district.
- This is important and we should seriously consider incorporating this into the day.
- Hearing parents share their perspective.
- We need more teaching training on this.
- Good ideas for discussion.

Master Schedule Group

Participants had a choice of selecting whether or not they are a “District Employee, “Elem” Parent, Etc. Next steps/suggestions you would like us to consider:

- Elem: Wellness walks in the schedule
- Middle: HAP (2)
- High: Rotations
- Middle/High: Research other school districts to see how they offer extra time during the day or down time (2)

Most important “take away” away for you:

- Need for flexibility
- This district continues to discuss and looks for ways to improve.
- HAP at all levels
- Embed clubs within the day
- There is a lot of planning that goes into master schedule. Teachers and admins have a tough job. Hope we as parents can do our part to ease it.

All Things AP Group

Participants had a choice of selecting whether or not they are a “District Employee, “Elem” Parent, Etc. Next steps/suggestions you would like us to consider:

- High: Closer look to what is being given out at the SBHS level.
- High: Teachers may need to collect data on how long their students complete HW.

Most important “take away” away for you:

- AP Courses should be decided by the students.
- We need these conversations at the beginning of the year. Parents/staff/students together.
- There is inequity in workload for AP courses. What does this mean? For example, no HW in some AP classes and just the opposite in others.
- Do conversations happen regarding choice, honor, AP?
- Re-thinking of taking AP.

A Question of Time Group

Participants had a choice of selecting whether or not they are a “District Employee, “Elem” Parent, Etc. Next steps/suggestions you would like us to consider:

- Elem: Little bit more HW. Gradual increase over the years. Add more HW for 4th and 5th and study guides. (2)
- Elem: Uniformity between schools. The amount of HW depends on child, on the grade level and different across schools. (3)
- High: HAP based on how many challenging courses kids have - not mandatory across all levels.
- Middle/High: Give HAP Time (3)
- Middle: Equal approach to common time - valued by music.
- District: Give mandatory study hall (2)
- Elem: Make sure teachers are consistent across all class/schools. (2)

- District: Please add PE - or everyday common time in middle school and compulsory study halls at SBHS.
- Elem: Give optional HW and mandatory HW. If kids want to do more, they can.
- High: Better time management help, study skills coaching and tips for finishing HW (5)
- High: Allow time for student to do HW during the day or to relax in the middle of the day.
- High: Implement more HW Free days (Memorial Day, NJEA Convention, At the end of every quarter, Etc.) (4)
- Elem: Some common practice discussed at grade level trainings.

Most important “take away” away for you:

- Glad to see HW free holidays do not hinder course completion. (2)
- We spent time talking a lot about elementary but did not spend time talking about high school. I like the fact that middle/high schoolteachers are talking. Hopefully, the transition will be better for kids. Next time, please have elementary, middle and high school sessions separately.
- The amount of HW time will always vary depending on the skill set of the child.
- Rich conversation headed in the right direction. It was great to find out all the thinking done about this subject.
- Lot of concerns at the high school - but should also focus at the elementary level, so help gets to students early.