

School Health Advisory Board Recommendations to the School Board December 10, 2015

Student Mental Health Related to Homework and Academic Load

We have continued to discuss student stress and mental health. We have been particularly concerned with the amount of homework that many of our students face at various levels, from elementary students doing worksheets through high schoolers taking multiple AP courses. This has been an ongoing discussion due to concerns about the mental health impact of excessive academic pressure as well as the myriad adverse mental and physical effects of sleep deprivation. Excessive homework in any grade has the potential to be counterproductive at many levels, including impacting the creativity and critical thinking skills that ACPS seeks to foster in our students

The board appreciates the support and effort of Dr. Haas, who convened a panel to review current practices and issue revised guidelines using evidence-based recommendations of education experts and academicians. While the panel reviewed policies at all grade levels, their work included a survey of high school students, parents, and teachers, and showed that while teachers have compelling reasons for the homework they assign, more than 40% of parents believe that their students “often” or “always” have too much homework. The board hopes that Dr. Haas’ committee will be able to recommend policies that will enhance learning and minimize stress. The board recommends that school administrators be asked to make sure that assigned homework complies with ACPS’s homework policy and consider requesting that subject and department teachers coordinate so they do not all assign big projects or tests at the same time.

Dr. Haas also is reviewing summer homework policies. There is a huge discrepancy between our high schools, with one high school assigning many hours of summer work and one requiring none. Of note, many of our AP and honors students have NO days without an assignment “hanging over their head” from the day they graduate middle school until high school graduation.

Along this line, we encourage continued discussion about the true utility of AP courses and the feasibility of limiting the number students take and/or replacing APs with classes that encourage more depth of learning and critical thinking and less “teaching to the test.”

Active Seating

Acknowledging the evidence that flexible (or “active”) seating has demonstrable educational benefits, the board was asked if we could recommend such seating for health benefits. There is compelling evidence that excessive and prolonged sitting is unhealthy for adults, leading to an increase in obesity, heart disease, certain cancers and overall death rate. We know that signs of atherosclerosis can be seen in elementary-aged children and there are some small studies showing worrisome physical changes in children during prolonged sitting. While we like to be able to base our recommendations on definitive evidence, there are clear health benefits of stand-up desks and active seating documented in the literature for adults and it is likely that these would pertain to children and adolescents. There is some evidence that children burn

more calories when using standing desks, particularly children who are obese, which is a healthful benefit. Based on this, the board would support active seating with the caveat that definitive evidence of benefits to children and adolescents is not yet available. In classrooms without active seating, regular “movement” breaks might also prove to have health benefits.

Banning Scented Products Such as Plug-ins and Sprays

For the health and safety of student and staff, environmental health experts recommend that schools consider measures to control air quality in buildings including refraining from the use of scented products. The issue of the use of air fresheners is of particular concern as asthma and migraine triggers, but also because these products contain phthalates and synthetic musks, both of which have been found to be endocrine disruptors. Due to these concerns plus the reported adverse effects on people with scent sensitivity (reported by some employees), the board recommends that ACPS ban the use of scented aerosol products (plug-ins and sprays) in school buildings.

Phasing in of Full-Time Nurses

Please see the attached report on the numbers of students with chronic health conditions. Trends noted from the data include increases in the diagnoses of seizure disorders, severe food allergies, and celiac disease as well as students who require tube feedings and medications.

The school clinics remain busy reporting 169,933 clinic visits last year or an average 965.5 clinic visits per day.

The board appreciates the increase in nurse hours at the 5 largest elementary schools this year and recommends consideration of eventually expanding the hours of the part-time nurses in the other elementary schools.

Updated Recommendations on Lice Management

To comply with recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control and the National Association of School Nurses, ACPS has adopted updated practice guidelines regarding lice management in schools. You have a copy of our handout, and if you haven't read it I strongly encourage you to do so.

Head lice are endemic among school-aged children at the rate of up to 10% at any given time in the US. Prior standard practice was that a child discovered to have lice was immediately excluded from school and not permitted to return until an inspection by the nurse revealed no sign of lice or nits/eggs. The rest of the students in the class were screened and letters were sent home to parents of classmates. This had unfortunate consequences such as extensive absences, overuse of pesticides, unnecessary trips to the doctor, missed work, involvement of health department and social services, and ostracized students.

As our handout says, everyone hates lice, but they do not spread disease, and are not easily transmitted in the school setting – they are much more likely to be transmitted in homes through siblings and sleepovers etc. They do not fly, jump or live on any surface other than the human head for very long. Since a child with visible lice infestation has probably had it for many weeks, there is little risk of further transmission in the next few hours and so the student does not need to be immediately sent home, although parents should be informed and the child should be treated before he/she returns. Nits (eggs) are not infectious, so children do not need to be nit-free before readmission. Prior “no-nit” policies have led to excessive and unnecessary absences and overtreatment. According to the school health experts, routine class screenings are not productive or cost-effective, nor are they an accurate way of predicting which children are or will become infested, and have not been proven to have a significant effect on the incidence of lice in a school. Finally, alert letters to parents are discouraged since there is no evidence these letters prevent head lice transmission, may cause unjustified panic and parents to treat prophylactically (which is absolutely not indicated), and may perpetuate the myth that lice are easily transmitted in schools.

The new ACPS procedure is that students discovered to have lice may stay in school until dismissal and are permitted to return after treatment as long as no live lice are present. Children with nits or eggs may stay in school since they are not contagious. In deference to parental request, the board agreed that the perceived benefit of alert letters is strong enough that schools may send such letters despite the discouragement of professional organizations and lack of evidence that this reduces the incidence of lice.

The board recommends a concerted effort to educate parents about the prevalence, symptoms and treatment of head lice.

School Immunization Clinics

A flu vaccine was offered at one pilot school last year (Baker Butler). Since there was minimal use of this clinic and significant logistical difficulty, this type of clinic will not be offered this year. All students and staff are encouraged to get their flu vaccine as soon as possible from their primary care provider, the health department, or local pharmacies.

Collaboration of committees

Dr. Moran realized that there was a lot of overlap in the concerns addressed by various committees such as the SHAB, Parent Council, special education, gifted education, and others. She hosted a meeting this fall with representatives from these committees that will hopefully lead to collaborations that will benefit our students.