



Acton-Boxborough Regional School District
Superintendent's Office
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Glenn A. Brand, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

April 5, 2016

Dear Parents and Guardians,

We are writing to collectively share information about our district's continued attention to the healthy self-development of our students.

Many of you are aware of the work being pursued in individual schools to support not only the academic growth of our students but also the social and emotional learning of our students, including their mental health and wellness. As both district and school level leaders, we share the concerns that many have expressed about the increasingly competitive, pressured, and hyper-focused environment in which we seem to find ourselves. The emphasis on encouraging a student to do one's best has often been overtaken by messages about needing to actually *be* the best. As a result, there exists an intensity of expectations--on behalf of many parents/guardians and educators alike--that have emerged because of perceived risks if our kids do not pursue an increasingly narrow definition of success.

There is, however, growing evidence that our efforts, though well-intentioned, aren't actually what is always best for kids. Pursuit of this narrow definition of success does not leave enough time and space to attend to the many other things we know a child needs to develop a sense of purpose and well-being in the course of his or her life. The concerns that many parents have about how best to navigate a competitive environment at times run counter to the reality that a healthy developmental course requires a broader, more nuanced definition of success.

Our school district is at a point where we feel the need to pursue a more deliberate and sustained approach to addressing this challenge. As leaders who are responsible for the healthy development of all students in our care, PK-12, we see the impact of a highly competitive environment, coupled with a narrow definition of success, in our schools on a daily basis. We seek to think deeply and deliberately about the type of educational experience we want to provide all of our students. To that end, we would like to provide opportunities to increase the dialogue, decision-making, and common language around this subject in a focused way. To build upon the ongoing work of our schools, our Student Support Services department, and partner organizations such as the PTSOs, we have decided to pursue a partnership with *Challenge Success* to help us with this work.

As part of a nationwide research and intervention program based out of Stanford University, **Challenge Success** (www.challengesuccess.org) is an organization that aims to reduce unhealthy pressures on youth and to champion a shift in how success is defined and measured in our schools and communities. They provide consultation, resources, and trainings to schools and communities who wish to pursue strategies for "creating environments that are necessary for children to mature into resilient, caring, and purposeful individuals." We are pleased to share that A-B has the opportunity to partner with *Challenge Success* in a number of ways, beginning with a student survey this Spring and continuing with other efforts in the Fall.

In late April, all students in grades 6 thru 12 will be asked to take the **Stanford Adolescent Experience survey**, which was designed by Dr. Denise Pope, one of the founders of *Challenge Success* and a professor at Stanford.

Our Mission is to prepare all students to attain their full potential as life-long learners, critical thinkers, and productive citizens of our diverse community and global society.

Families will receive additional information about participation in the survey in about a week. The survey includes questions about many of the issues we've been exploring at Acton-Boxborough such as stress, homework, sleep, parental expectations, academic goals and integrity, and extracurricular commitments. We anticipate that individual schools will find value in the student survey results, and will use them to carry on school-specific efforts and conversations. Additionally, we are also excited about what this survey can contribute to our district-wide efforts. The results will be shared with parents and families in the Fall, and will hopefully serve as a springboard to community-based conversations that bring together educators, parents and guardians, and other community members invested in the well-being of our students.

Please know that we have no illusions that a short-term approach to these issues will yield outcomes that endure. Our attention to our students' healthy development in an increasingly competitive, complex society will require a sustained commitment beyond the next few years, and will be embedded throughout our district's next strategic plan. To be sure, these challenges are influenced by larger societal factors and practices that exist across our country and are not isolated to our district. Nevertheless, we believe that it is within our power as a thoughtful community to not only wrestle with these hard and complicated challenges but to also emerge from this work with ideas that will have tangible benefits for our students. Furthermore, we are encouraged by similar efforts of other school communities both in the area and other parts of the country, and we hope to benefit from their work as well.

We plan to provide ongoing communication, opportunities for the community to be involved with the *Challenge Success* work and to provide feedback, as well as community partnerships that will allow us to more fully and confidently address these challenges.

We hope that you share our enthusiasm for what comes next.

Regards,

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Superintendent of Schools

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