

**Bi-Monthly "FOCUS"  
publication of the  
Acton-Boxborough Regional  
Schools Parent-Teacher-  
Student Organization**

# INFOCUS

## Welcome to *InFocus*!

**W**elcome to the introductory issue of our new quarterly PTSO publication! Each of the four issues will be focused in-depth on a particular topic. An introductory article will be accompanied by an article from both the RJ Grey Junior High and Acton-Boxborough Regional High School about the day-to-day perspective on the particular topic from their point of view. We will also ask the School Committee for their point of view on the topic.

This issue is focused on the role of homework for junior high and high school students, describing some of the national trends in this area and some studies about whether homework is helpful or not. The articles from ABRHS and RJ Grey describe how each school sees the role of homework, and helpful advice for parents/guardians about how to support students in getting their homework accomplished. In addition, RJ Grey will sponsor a series of parent forums again this year, and the first one, slated for Monday, December 10 from 7–8:30 p.m. in the library, is titled, "Haggling About Homework." Principal Craig Hardimon's description in his recent *Grey Matters*, states:

*Studying and meeting deadlines is always a part of school. Parents often ask, "What's the best way for me to help my child with homework?" Students often ask for help and advice on how to organize their homework time, how to balance homework with their other activities and*

*what to do if they find themselves stuck on a homework assignment. A toolbox of study skill and time management ideas will be shared by experienced RJG teachers that will help your child sail through school.*

Another feature of our quarterly publication will be a tear-out two-month calendar, showing all the important upcoming dates. Finally, we'll include any late-breaking news that you all need to know.

As always, we'd appreciate your feedback. Please send any input regarding topics you would like to see covered "*InFocus*" as well as our new format to <http://abrptso.ab.mec.edu>.

In between our quarterly publications that will be mailed to all regional school families (except those who have opted to receive these publications electronically — thank you!) we will use our Constant Contact e-mail lists to send out a monthly update from the high school and any other important and timely information. If you haven't already done so, we encourage you to sign up for electronic updates on our website ([abrptso.ab.mec.edu](http://abrptso.ab.mec.edu)), and check in with your friends and neighbors to see that they have done so as well.

Thank you in advance for your feedback!

— Dawn Gomez

## What's the Point of Homework?

***Does it extend the learning experience to home, or does it add stress to families' lives?***

*By Mary Ann Ashton, PTSO Co-Chair*

**W**hether it's concerns about too much or too little, homework seems to be one of the major issues on the minds of parents, guardians, and students as families make the transition from elementary school to RJ Grey, and again in the transition from RJ Grey to the high school. As families begin to settle into the fall routine of school, parents huddle on the sidelines of fields, chat through car windows in the parking lot, or gather in the aisles of grocery stores to worry about "how much homework" and whether homework is adding to the amount of stress that their kids (and families) are experiencing.

The Acton/Acton-Boxborough School District has a policy about homework (available on the school district website, along with other school policies, at <http://ab.mec.edu/about/policies.shtml>), which describes homework as "an assignment to be prepared during a period of supervised study in class or outside of class." The policy states that the purposes of homework are "to improve the learning processes, to aid in the mastery of skills, and to create and stimulate interest on the part of the student."

Other studies cite non-academic ben-

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# What's the Point of Homework

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efits for the student. Homework can help students to learn responsibility, to manage their time effectively, to develop study habits, and to persist with a task until it is completed. Other studies (most notably by Duke University homework expert Harris Cooper) indicate that too much homework can diminish its effectiveness. A study of the literature about the relationship between homework and academic achievement found that the optimum time spent on homework for high school students was 1-1/2 to 2 hours per night, and for middle school students approximately one hour per night.

A study conducted by the University of Michigan in 2004 found that the amount of time spent on homework by American kids had increased 51 percent since 1981. Most of that increase was experienced among very young students (ages 6 to 8), but these students expect to excel and are accustomed to workloads by the time they reach our junior high and high schools. Sometimes as a nation we feel that we need to spend more time on homework in order to "catch up" with the rest of the world, but a 2007 study of worldwide math scores (by Gerald LeTrendre at Pennsylvania State University) shows that students with more homework often have lower scores.

Two books published last year produced much discussion in the education and parent community about the role of homework. Alfie Kohn's *The Homework Myth* and another authored by two moms, Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish, entitled *The Case Against Homework*, present studies, statistics and anecdotes that document that homework is not improving student achievement but is adding an additional stress factor to families who only gather together at the end of busy days. In response, some school districts are pushing back. An article in last year's *The Wall Street Journal* described how some school districts (including Wellesley and Needham in Massachusetts) are responding by curbing the amount of work assigned and changing the type of homework from busy work to that which is "worthy of our students' time," in the words of one interviewee.

In our Acton-Boxborough junior high and high schools, the amount of time that homework can consume varies considerably. Some experts advise a guideline of 10 minutes per grade of the child, a concept adopted by several of our elementary schools. This notion recognizes (as does the school district policy) that students can handle more difficult and time-consuming tasks as they get older.

If one were to follow this rule-of-thumb, students in grade 7 would spend 70 minutes per night and this amount would gradually increase to two hours for seniors. Our students seem to spend more than this. The accompanying piece from the junior high suggests that junior

high students are expected to spend one to two hours per night. The high school's annual Senior Survey shows that students fall evenly into four groups. One-quarter of the students spend less than one hour; one-quarter spend 1-2 hours; one-quarter spends 2-3 hours; and one-quarter spends three or more hours.

A project by the Stanford University School of Education called "Stressed Out Students" has sponsored annual conferences to address the level of student stress. Denise Clark Pope, the founder of the program, states the goals of the program on its website (<http://www.stanford.edu/dept/SUSE/sosconference/>): "In the past ten years we have seen an alarming increase in academic stress in students of all ages. The SOS-Stressed Out Students project examines the sources of this stress and works with students, parents, teachers and school communities to devise site-specific strategies to foster student health, integrity, and school engagement."

Our school district policy focuses on the positive benefits of homework, encouraging "consistent assignments which encourage students to investigate for themselves and to work independently as well as with others." Parents play a supporting role in this endeavor, and the response from RJ Grey contains some helpful hints from our own district experts and others about what parents can do to help.

## ABRHS: Ways that Teachers Use Homework

At the high school level homework is used to extend learning beyond the time available for classes. It enables teachers to use class time more effectively by having students:

- 1) prepare reading assignments in advance of class discussion
- 2) work independently on areas where extra instruction is needed before advancing to more difficult concepts
- 3) practice skills beyond the classroom
- 4) work on projects which extend classroom instruction in creative ways.

The type and amount of homework varies considerably depending on the course and level. There are no standardized homework time expectations for all high school students. In last year's Senior End of the Year Survey, the percentage of students reporting varied amounts of time spent on homework on an average day were as follows:

- 0 to 30 minutes – 8%
- 30 minutes to 1 hour – 14%
- 1 to 2 hours – 30%
- 2 to 3 hours – 25%

Teacher standards and expectations for homework are explained to students at the beginning of the year and to parents on Back to School Night. All teachers make themselves available regularly to assist students who are having difficulty. The Academic Support Center also offers assistance to students on a regular or drop-in basis.

— Kay Steeves, Student/Faculty Support Coordinator

## RJ Grey: How Parents Can Be Helpful

At RJ Grey, homework is a natural extension to the learning process. It provides students with the opportunity to apply and practice their new knowledge. Homework also promotes student responsibility by developing work habits that will be essential for succeeding in life. Students will be assigned homework on a regular basis in English,

Math, Science, Social Studies, and World Language. On occasion Exploratory teachers may also assign homework in their subjects. Students should expect 1 to 2 hours of homework each night. It is very important that students complete their homework since it is a reinforcement of the knowledge learned in class.

— Allison Warren, Asst. Principal

Parents of children in the 7th and 8th grades can help their child complete their homework in the following ways:

- **Help your child set up an organized place to complete homework.** This space should be distraction free and quiet.
- **Help your child develop a schedule for completing homework and school projects.** Utilize your child's RJ Grey assignment planner to assist with developing a schedule and tracking assignments.
- **Refer to teachers' websites** for assignment clarification.
- **Communicate your concerns about homework/projects** to your child's teacher as soon as possible.

## 2007–2008 Homework Assignments for the Regional School Committee

This year the Regional School Committee has assigned itself several homework assignments which I am happy to explain in this article. Our first assignment is to improve our working relationship with the Acton Leadership Group (ALG) and Boxborough Leadership Forum (BLF). This is imperative as town boards and committees continue the challenge of providing needed services while remaining fiscally responsible.

Our second assignment is researching the 990 education hours mandate at the high school. A subcommittee, led by Sharon Smith McManus and Brigid Bieber, is working with other community members to provide insight and recommendations in regards to the mandate. Our third assignment is another subcommittee, led by Michael Coppelino and Xuan Kong that is analyzing the financial impact of Special Education.

We have several other minor homework assignments that include improving the budget process, understanding the different ways that each gender learns, monitoring the health care costs of our employees, and focusing on Chapter 70 (state education) funding. In addition, the committee will work with the administration as it begins the search process for a new high school principal.

So the school committee has a full plate of homework assignments for this school year and we look forward to reporting to you during the year.

— Bruce Sabot, AB Chairperson

NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 2007

# INFOCUS

**Newsletter of the Acton-Boxborough Regional  
Schools Parent-Teacher-Student Organization**

Acton-Boxborough Regional High School  
Acton, MA 01720

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- ***PTSO's new "focus" publication***
- ***Check inside for pull out calendar***
- ***The next PTSO-sponsored forum:  
Stresses in the Busy Lives of JH & HS Students  
Tuesday, January 8, 12–2pm, Acton Memorial Library***

## **PTSO E-MAIL LIST**

If you have not signed up for the Regional PTSO e-mails yet, please go to our website <http://abrptso.ab.mec.edu> and click on the PTSO EMAILS link. You will receive the new HS and JH electronic "updates" as well as occasional PTSO reminders, clarifications, information regarding parenting programs and last minute requests for volunteer assistance. You do not have to be on this list, but it is a simple way to keep in touch with school happenings. There is no cost, and you can change or delete your own e-mail address at any time.

## **DO YOU NEED TO UPDATE YOUR PROFILE?**

If you are already receiving e-mails from the PTSO, you only need to update your profile IF you have a child new to the JH (such as an incoming 7th grader) or HS. Please go to the link above and click on "Update Profile". From there, check the appropriate graduating class box.

## **PTSO NEWSLETTER & UPDATES AVAILABLE ON-LINE**

The PTSO recognizes the cost of doing business electronically. Families may choose to be mailed a quarterly newsletter OR simply read it from our website. (All families on the e-mail list will be sent the link.) To be removed from the paper copy mailing list, go to the bottom of any PTSO e-mail and click on "Update Profile". From there, check the box that says "e-newsletter only", then submit.

# NOVEMBER 2007

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<input type="checkbox"/> High School Schedule  <input type="checkbox"/> Junior High School Schedule				<b>1</b> 7:30 pm – Regional School Committee  8th Grade Minuteman Trip	<b>2</b> 7:30 pm – Fall Play	<b>3</b> SAT and Subject Tests 7:30 pm – Fall Play
<b>4</b>	<b>5</b> 2:30 pm – Faculty Meeting	<b>6</b> Professional Day NO SCHOOL for Students	<b>7</b> MCAS Retests  12:22 – Student Council	<b>8</b> Term 1 Ends MCAS Retests	<b>9</b> Diwali MCAS Retests 7:30 pm – Fall Play  Diwali Term 1 Ends Make-Up Picture Day	<b>10</b> 7:30 pm – Fall Play
<b>11</b>	<b>12</b> Veterans Day NO SCHOOL	<b>13</b>  7–8:30 pm – School Council	<b>14</b> MCAS Retests Senior Portraits	<b>15</b> MCAS Retests Senior Portraits	<b>16</b> Senior Portraits 7:00 pm – Junior Dance 7:30 pm – Cabaret Night  6:30–8:30 pm – 8th Grade Dance	<b>17</b> 7:30 pm – Cabaret Night
<b>18</b>	<b>19</b> 6:00 pm – School Council	<b>20</b> Homeroom Report Card Distribution	<b>21</b> Half Day FRD  10:40 am – Early Dismissal	<b>22</b> Thanksgiving Recess NO SCHOOL	<b>23</b> Thanksgiving Recess NO SCHOOL	<b>24</b>
<b>25</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>29</b> 7:00 pm – Financial Aid Night	<b>30</b> 7:00 pm – Hypnotist	

# DECEMBER 2007

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<input type="checkbox"/> High School Schedule  <input type="checkbox"/> Junior High School Schedule						<b>1</b> SAT and Subject Tests
<b>2</b>	<b>3</b> 2:30 pm – Faculty Meeting	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b> Chanukah	<b>6</b> 7:30 pm – Regional School Committee	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
			12:22 pm – Student Council	10:40 am – Early Dismissal 11:30–2:30 pm – Parent Conferences		
<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b> 7:30 pm – ABRHS Winter Concert	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b> 7:30 am – Career Breakfast	<b>14</b> Interim Reports	<b>15</b>
		7–8:30 pm – School Council		10:40 am – Early Dismissal 11:30–2:30 pm – Parent Conference		
<b>16</b>	<b>17</b> 6:00 pm – School Council	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b> 1:30 pm – Alumni Holiday Reception	<b>21</b>	<b>22</b>
				Interim Reports		
<b>23/30</b>	<b>24/31</b> Winter Recess	<b>25</b> Winter Recess Christmas	<b>26</b> Winter Recess Kwanzaa	<b>27</b> Winter Recess	<b>28</b> Winter Recess	<b>29</b>