



New Hampshire

# Department of Education

## STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**2021- 2022 Wellness Research in NH Schools & Home School Environments**

**RFP 2020-**

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Auxiliary aids and services are available upon request to individuals with disabilities.

## Section 1 – Overview and Schedule

### A. Executive Summary

The purpose of this RFP is to seek proposals from individuals, agencies, institutions or organizations (hereafter referred to as applicant(s) to work with the NH Department of Education, Bureau of Student Wellness to conduct up to three research projects related to student wellness in NH school districts during the 21-22 Academic Year. These studies shall be conducted in a post COVID, post virtual learning environment. The three proposed studies are:

Research Project #1: An Intervention Experiment Aimed at Increasing Play, Joy, Friendships, and Self-Efficacy Among Elementary School Students

Research Project #2: A Survey and Focus-Group Study of Secondary Students' Perceptions of Sources of School-Induced Distress and of How Schooling Could Be Improved

Research Project #3: Surveys of Homeschooling Families Aimed at Learning Why They Have Chosen Homeschooling over Public Schooling

**Minimum Requirements:** In order to be considered, the applicant must provide evidence of the following minimum requirements. This may include CV's, transcripts, institutional NECHE certification, IRB certification, etc. Having proximity to NH and NH school districts is encouraged.

- 1.1 Have knowledge of and experience with survey methodology;
- 1.2 Possess knowledge of, and experience with both quantitative and qualitative analysis of survey results;
- 1.3 Possess prior experiences that demonstrate the ability to successfully implement one or all of the proposed research projects;
- 1.4 Be able to turn the proposal, as currently written, into specific projects with research fidelity measures that can be managed within a specified timeline;
- 1.5 Provide an itemized budget specifying the costs of the project;
- 1.6 For Study #2 the applicant should have experience with focus group methodology or partner with someone with such experience.

The applicant(s) must also provide the following for each study they wish to conduct:

Research Study 1: a timeline for the project within the scope allowed that includes major milestones. This timeline must include the activities that will be implemented, statistical approaches, and the resources/budget that will used to implement them.

Research Study 2: a timeline for the project within the scope allowed that includes major milestones. This timeline must include the activities that will be implemented, statistical approaches, and the resources/budget that will used to implement them.

Research Study 3: a timeline for the project within the scope allowed that includes major milestones. This timeline must include the activities that will be implemented, statistical approaches, and the resources/budget that will used to implement them.

Applicants should also submit a copy of qualifying credentials along with a statement of why they are interested in one or more of these research studies, the details of which are presented below.

Additionally, include a full, detailed application specifying how they would approach and conduct the study (including information about the team involved and any modifications they propose prior to IRB

submission), a timeline for completion is required. The applicant may apply to conduct one or more of the three research proposals.

Award: The Term of the Contract will be for up to two years from the date of approval. The contract term may be extended by an additional term of 1 year at the sole option of the State, subject to the parties' prior written agreement on terms and applicable fees for each extended term, contingent upon satisfactory vendor performance, continued funding and Governor and Executive Council approval.

**B. Schedule**

The following table provides a Schedule of Events for this RFP through contract finalization and approval. The Agency reserves the right to amend this Schedule at its sole discretion and at any time through a published Addendum.

| EVENT   | DATE       | LOCAL TIME |
|---|------------|------------|
| RFP Released to Proposers (Advertisement)                           | 12/31/2020 | 4 P.M.     |
| Proposer Inquiry Period Ends  | 01/14/2021 | 4 P.M.     |
| Final Agency Responses to Proposer Inquiries                        | 02//2021   | 4 P.M.     |
| Proposers Submit Proposals  | 03/01/2021 | 4 P.M.     |
| Estimated Notification of Selection and Begin Contract Negotiations | 03/30/2021 | 4 P.M.     |

**Section 2 - Description of Agency/Program Issuing the Request for Proposals**

The work of the Office of Social & Emotional Wellness (OSEW) is focused on health and wellness-with an emphasis on behavioral health of all students, youth, and families. The OSEW has had significant experience leading and managing large, transformative projects, including both state and federal grants. The OSEW uses, as the foundation of all of its work, NH's Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for Behavioral Health and Wellness (MTSS-B) model. The partnerships created as a result of this work have created an environment of mutual learning and a common approach to scale-up and sustainability that focuses on activities reflective of NH's cultural norms, including that of "local control" in education.

**Section 3 – Proposed Scope of Work**

Contractor shall conduct and complete one or more of the below three research studies and meet additional requirements presented below the description of the studies.

**Research Study #1: An Intervention Experiment Aimed at Increasing Play, Joy, Friendships, and Self-Efficacy among Elementary School Students**

Children's lives now are far less free, far more regulated by adults, than was true in decades past. Research has shown continuous declines, over the past half century or more, in children's opportunities to play and explore freely, especially outdoors, and continuous increases in the amount of time they spend at schoolwork and other adult-managed, adult-judged activities. From year to year these changes have been small, hardly noticeable, but cumulatively they have been huge. Historians and social scientists have presented evidence that the decline in children's freedom began in the mid twentieth century and has been continuing ever since (Chudacoff, 2007; Frost, 2012; Gray, 2011a). The changes derive from a variety of social causes.

One of the causes, clearly, is the increased weight of schooling. Between the 1950s and 2010s, the average length of the school year increased by five full weeks (Column Five Media, [here](#)). Homework, which was once rare or nonexistent in elementary school, is now common even in kindergarten. One study revealed that the average amount of time that school children (age 6-17) spent at school plus schoolwork at home increased by 7.5 hours per week just between 1981 and 2003 (Juster et al., 2004), which is equivalent to adding nearly an entire adult workday to children's weekly schoolwork. Moreover, as schools have become more focused on improving scores on standardized exams, recess has been greatly curtailed or even abolished in many schools, and other creative, non-graded activities that were once an enjoyable part of the school day have likewise been reduced or removed.

Another cause of the decline in children's freedom, clearly, is increased societal fear about allowing children to play and roam freely outdoors, away from adults. The fear is fed not by actual increases in crime or other dangers, but by media hype about crime, the warnings of "experts" about dangers, and increased litigiousness and hence fear of lawsuits if a child is injured (Gray, 2011a, 2013; Skenazy, 2009).

It should be no surprise that reductions in children's freedom to play and explore in their own chosen ways would result in deterioration of children's mental health. Life without play is depressing, especially for children. Free outdoor play is also, traditionally, how children found and made friends, and life without friends is depressing. The increased testing and increased weight placed on test scores have, obviously, made school ever more anxiety-provoking. And adult-managed competitive sports—where there is focus on making the team, performing in front of adults, and winning—while valuable in some ways are certainly more anxiety-provoking than free play.

Research has, indeed, documented huge declines in children's mental health over the same decades that children's freedom has declined. For example, as judged by standardized clinical questionnaires given in unchanged form to normative groups of young people over the decades, the rates of what today would be called *Major Depressive Disorder* and *Generalized Anxiety Disorder* increased roughly 5- to 8-fold between the 1950s and early 2000s (Twenge et al, 2010), and other measures identify even further large increases in anxiety and depression since then (see Denizet-Lewis, 2017). The suicide rate for children under age 15 increased by 6-fold between the 1950s and 2014 (calculated from Center for Disease Control suicide tables). Other research has revealed a continuous decline in young people's sense of control over their own lives (decline in internal locus of control) over this same period (Twenge et al, 2004). And still other research has revealed a continuous and overall large decline in creative thinking, as assessed by the well-validated Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, among schoolchildren at all grade levels, at least from the mid 1980s through the first decade of the twenty-first century (Kim, 2011). Take away free play, increase the stress of school, reduce children's opportunities to control their own lives, and take away time for creative activities and what do you get? Depression, anxiety, loss of internal locus of control, and reductions in creative thinking.

Evidence for the role of schooling in the declining mental health of young people comes not just from correlations over decades, but also from correlations within the calendar year. A study of "Stress in America" conducted by the American Psychological Association, published ([here](#)) in 2014, found that teenagers in school were the most stressed-out people in the United States and that 83% of them attributed their stress at least partly if not fully to school. When the survey was conducted during summer vacation from school, the percentage reporting the experience of severe stress was cut in half compared to what was found when school was in session. Other research reveals that, for young people of school age, but for nobody else, the rates of emergency mental health admissions, attempted suicides, and actual suicides are roughly twice as high during weeks when school is in session compared to when school is not in session (Hansen & Lang, 2011; Lueck et al., 2015; Plemmons et al., 2018). Two recent surveys one in the US and one in the UK, have revealed—contrary to many people's expectations—that the pandemic-induced closure of schools in the spring of 2020 resulted in an overall reduction in anxiety in school-aged children ([here](#) and [here](#)). A large-scale study of hundreds of middle-school children from many different school districts, which involved reporting on their moods at random times when a beeper went off, revealed that school was where they were least often happy (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003).

Another large study, in which high-school students were asked to report on their feelings at school, revealed that 75% of the reports were of negative feelings. The most common feelings reported were *tired*, *stressed*, and *bored* (Moeller et al., 2020).

Although the dramatic, overt symptoms of stress (such as mental health breakdowns, suicides, and drug abuse) show up most often in secondary schools, the stress leading to those symptoms is, increasingly, already present in elementary schools. In fact, there is growing evidence that even kindergarten children are in many cases experiencing pathological levels of stress related to academic demands and rote drill methods of teaching that have trickled down from the upper grades to the lowest (see Gray, 2019). One research study, for example, revealed that hair cortisol levels in young children were significantly higher two months after starting elementary school than they were two months before starting (Groeneveldt et al., 2013). Hair cortisol is an index of chronic stress, of the sort that can interfere with growth and health. By the time children reach middle school, many are already burnt out and cynical about schooling.

The primary purpose of Study 1, in this set of proposals, is to determine whether specific interventions in elementary schools can increase children's joy related to school, their friendships, their psychological resilience, their sense of control over their own lives, their confidence in their ability to solve life problems, and even their ability to negotiate with their parents for opportunities to engage in activities they would like to pursue. Additional purposes are to determine if these interventions improve school climate (the sense of school as a friendly, welcoming place), improve students' academic performance, and reduce the academic gap between students coming from wealthier and more impoverished backgrounds. The possibility that these interventions would reduce the academic gap is supported by previous research showing that programs aimed at making students feel more welcome and "at-home" in school boost academic achievement for students from economically deprived families even more than for students from wealthier families (Berkowitz et al., 2017).

The interventions to be employed in this research are *Play Club* and the *Let Grow Project*, both developed and named by the nonprofit organization *Let Grow*. These programs were piloted in elementary schools in the Patchogue-Medford school district in New York, in 2018, and were subsequently adopted by many other schools. To date, there has been little systematic research on their effects, but testimony from students, teachers, and parents indicate that the programs are very well received by all involved and suggest that they have the intended positive consequences for children's development.

## **Play Club**

*Play Club* is a regularly scheduled opportunity for elementary school children in all grades (K – 5) to play freely together either before school opens in the morning or after it closes in the afternoon. *Play Club* differs from typical school recess opportunities in that it is generally of longer duration; children in all grades play together rather than in age-segregated groups; rules are far fewer and simpler; and the adult monitors are instructed, and in some cases trained, to avoid intervening in the play unless there is a real emergency. A major purpose of *Play Club* is to provide children with freedom and opportunities to learn how to get along and work out their own problems without adult intervention. Age mixing among children is a crucial aspect of *Play Club*, as research has shown that mixed-age play has many benefits over same-age play (for a review, see Gray, 2011b). It is generally more nurturing, more creative, less competitive, and provides opportunities for younger children to learn from older ones and older children to practice leadership and nurturance with younger ones. It also provides opportunity for children to make friends with others who are not in their grade and for younger children to overcome the fears that many have of older children and therefore to feel more comfortable at school. Moreover, children who are socially inhibited have been found to overcome that inhibition by playing with younger children and thereby developing social competence and confidence (Gray, 2011b).

The scheduled time of *Play Club*, at schools that have adopted it, has varied depending on what works best for the school. The Patchogue-Medford school district offered it at all seven of its elementary schools

every Friday for an hour before school started, from 8:00 to 9:00 am. They limited it each term to 100 students, chosen by lottery from among those who wished to join, with that group changing each term. Students played mostly outdoors, but, especially in bad weather, could also play in the gym, the school hallways, and one or two other rooms that had games and art supplies available. As another example, a school in South Carolina made free play available every morning for everyone who showed up, beginning at 7:25 am and ending when school started at 8:00 am. In addition, that same school scheduled *Play Club* for an hour after school, two days a week, for a different group of students each day.

*Let Grow* has received rave reviews from schools that have adopted *Play Club* and, so far, no reports of disappointment. Most of the reviews were in the form of testimonies from parents, teachers, and school principals and some involved interviews with students (for a video sample of students' discussing *Play Club*, see [here](#)). Students of course enjoyed greatly the free play opportunities, and many said they made new friends through *Play Club* and gained a sense of accomplishment from their ability to work out their own problems without adult help. Although some parents at some schools were initially concerned that older children might bully younger ones, no schools have to date reported this to be a serious problem. The only formal research study of *Play Club* to date is one by Heather Parrott and Lynn Cohen of Long Island University, which involved systematic interviews of children and teachers and surveys of parents focusing especially on the value of mixed-age interactions in *Play Club* at one school. Their report, which has been accepted for publication by the *International Journal of Play*, concludes, in part: "Across the different types of data, stakeholders expressed their support for cross-age interactions in mixed-age groupings. This play was perceived as valuable for helping to build friendships and developing skills, as older children became role models to younger ones."

### **The Let Grow Project**

The *Let Grow Project* is a program in which teachers give students regular homework assignments to do something new, on their own, of their own choosing with their parents' permission, that seems in some way difficult or scary and then to report on their experience. This project, like *Play Club*, was first piloted at the Patchogue-Medford elementary schools and has since been adopted by many other schools. The primary purpose is to help counter the restrictions of opportunities for adventure that limit children's lives in today's culture. Because it is presented as homework, parents take it seriously and work with their children to allow adventures that they might not have allowed before. Typical *Let Grow* adventures chosen by children and approved by parents are such things as bicycling independently around the block or to a friend's house, walking the dog alone, cooking dinner, or using a tool they had not used before.

No formal studies have been conducted of the *Let Grow Project*, but, as with *Play Club*, teachers', students', and parents' informal reports on it have been very positive. According to such testimony, children gain courage and parents gain increased respect for their children's abilities, which can lead to a spiral of increasing freedom for children. [Here](#) is a video in which a long-time health education teacher talks about her experiences with the *Let Grow* project with seventh graders; [here](#) is another video of third-graders and parents talking about their *Let Grow* experiences; and [here](#) is a PBS NewsHour clip that (beginning at about the 5 minute mark) presents the rationale for both *Play Club* and the *Let Grow Project* and shows children involved in both.

### **Research Questions**

The primary questions to be addressed by the proposed research have to do with effects on students of participation in *Play Club* and/or the *Let Grow Project*, where such effects will be assessed by comparisons with otherwise comparable students that were not in these programs.

Specifically, does participation in one or the other or both of these programs

- Increase students' happiness?
- Decrease students' anxiety?
- Increase students' friendships?
- Decrease students' loneliness?

- Increase students' sense of control over their own lives?
- Increase students' confidence and courage?
- Increase students' free play outside of school, especially outdoors with friends?
- Improve students' attitudes about school?
- Improve students' academic performance?
- Reduce the gap in academic performance between students from wealthier and more impoverished backgrounds?

Other questions to be addressed by the research are these:

- Do schools that participate in one or the other of these programs (or both) manifest an increase in positive school climate compared to schools that do not? [School climate will be assessed by the degree to which students and teachers see the school as a friendly, welcoming place.]
- Do teachers whose students are in one or another of these programs manifest increased enjoyment of their work compared to other teachers?
- Do teachers who monitor *Play Club* develop a greater appreciation of children's abilities compared to teachers who do not have that opportunity?
- Based on the daily logs of *Play Club* monitors, what sorts of problems arose among the children and how were they resolved without adult intervention? When and why was adult intervention necessary, if ever? What interesting cross-age interactions did the monitors observe?

## Research Design

The first step in conducting this research would be to identify elementary schools that are interested in adopting *Play Club* and/or the *Let Grow Project*. The recruitment process might begin with a letter from the New Hampshire Commissioner of Education to school superintendents and/or principals about the project with a request to respond if interested. This could be followed up with one or more webinars in which interested parties could meet with Lenore Skenazy and possibly also with one or more of the principals or teachers who have previously adopted these programs to discuss the project further and answer questions. Such recruitment would occur during the 2020-21 school year for the study that would take place during the 2021-22 school year. This scheduling assumes that the COVID-19 pandemic would have subsided sufficiently by the fall of 2021 that close contact among students is once again possible.

Ideally, 12 to 16 schools, or possibly more, some in cities and some in smaller towns, would volunteer to be included in the study. The primary requirement for participation would be willingness to administer the studies' questionnaires for students, teachers, and parents three times over the course of the year—once early in the school year, once in the middle of the year, and once near the end of the year. For a few schools, that would be their entire way of participating during the 2021-22 school year. They would be “control schools” for comparison to schools that adopted *Play Club* and/or the *Let Grow Project*. It should be noted that the questionnaires themselves, even without the Let Grow programs, could have a beneficial effect by making children's social and emotional experiences more salient to all involved at the school. Other schools, “experimental schools,” would agree not just to administer the questionnaires but also to adopt either *Play Club* or the *Let Grow Project* or both. The ideal mix might be that a fourth of the schools would be control schools, another fourth would adopt *Play Club*, another fourth would adopt the *Let Grow Project*, and the remaining fourth would adopt both—but it is not necessary that the numbers be even.

The manner in which *Play Club* is administered could vary from school to school in accordance with the schools' needs and preferences. Schools might hold *Play Club* sessions before or after school, might vary in the frequency with which sessions are held, and might vary in the number of students that can be accommodated. Likewise, the specific manner in which the *Let Grow Project* is administered could vary by school and even by classroom within any given school.

The statistical comparisons made in the study would not be just between schools, but also between different groups of students within schools. For example, in larger schools it is likely that not all students who wish to be in *Play Club* (and whose parents approve) could be accommodated at once. In that case one group might be in *Play Club* the first half year and another group the second half, determined by lottery. The researchers could then use the data from the first and second administrations of the questionnaires to compare changes that occurred during the first half year for those in *Play Club* that semester with those who were on the wait list. Similarly, in larger schools some teachers at each grade level might agree to hold off on administering the *Let Grow Project* during the first half year so as to provide a within-school control group for that semester.

## **The Questionnaires**

The questionnaires to be administered near the beginning, middle, and end of the school year are deliberately kept short and simple so as to maximize compliance and not take too much of the participants' time. The drafts presented here represent the questions to be asked but are not formatted as they would be for the actual study. To the degree possible, the questionnaires would be administered using an online survey program, which would facilitate data compilation and analyses.

If all goes as planned, the questionnaires would be administered at the end of the first two weeks of the school year (just before the beginning of *Play Club* and the *Let Grow Project* for schools adopting these programs), again at the midpoint of the school year, and again near the end of the school year. All students, parents, and teachers in elementary schools that opt into the research project would be asked to fill out these forms, whether or not the school, or the children within the school, were involved in *Play Club* or the *Let Grow Project*. This would allow for multiple comparisons, to look for changes over each half year and over the whole school year and how those changes differed for those involved in *Play Club*, *Let Grow Project*, both, or neither.

The questionnaires would be presented simply as a part of each school's procedure for collecting information about the overall wellbeing of students. They would demonstrate that the schools are interested in the whole child, not just the child's academic progress. The questionnaires would not be presented in a way that linked them directly to the interventions; the interventions would not be mentioned in any of the questions. The purpose of this is to reduce the possibility of what researchers call "demand bias," the bias in responding that can come when participants' consciously or unconsciously respond in a manner that they think is consistent with the researchers' hypothesis. For example, if participants thought of the questionnaire as an evaluation of *Play Club*, and they know that *Play Club* is hypothesized to increase children's number of friendships, they might be inclined to overestimate the number of friendships. By keeping such purposes of the questionnaire opaque, the chance of such biases is reduced. However, a separate end-of-year set of questions, after all other questionnaires are completed, might ask for specific evaluations of *Play Club* and the *Let Grow Project*.

The questionnaires presented below should be thought of as first drafts, to be modified and improved by the researchers who carry out the study, perhaps through a process that involves piloting them with some students, parents, and teachers who would not be part of the study and also gaining feedback from school personnel concerning questions that would be particularly interesting to them.

### **Questionnaire for Children**

For participating children in third grade or above, this questionnaire would be filled out by the children, in their classroom, in a manner in which the names would be kept anonymous. Participating children in grades below third grade might need help in filling out the questionnaires, in which case they might be filled out at home with parents' help, or, if possible, at school with the help of someone who is not a teacher, does not know which classroom the child is in, and who agrees to keep the answers anonymous. It is also possible that the researchers would decide to collect questionnaire data only from children in grades 3 through 5 and to rely just on the teacher and parent questionnaires for the younger children.



*A. This questionnaire will be presented to all children in the school near the beginning of the school year, near the middle, and again near the end. Children will be asked to respond, on a 1-5 scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, to each of the following:*

- I have been HAPPY most of the time during the past few weeks.
- I have quite often been ANXIOUS or STRESSED during the past few weeks.
- I have quite often been LONELY during the past few weeks.
- I have quite often been DEPRESSED or SAD during the past few weeks.
- I have made good friends at my school.
- I have made friends with students who are in grades above me at school (doesn't apply to those in highest grade).
- I have made friends with students who are in grades below me at school (doesn't apply to those in lowest grade).
- I really like most of the other students I have met at this school.
- Sometimes I am bullied by other students at this school.
- I really like my main classroom teacher.
- The teachers and other adults at this school like me and care about me.
- I am sometimes treated in a mean way by a teacher or other adult at this school.
- Most days I enjoy going to school.
- All in all, I find my schoolwork to be quite interesting.
- Generally, I feel that I can solve most problems that arise in my life.
- I am good at meeting people and making new friends.
- I usually prefer to figure things out myself rather than ask an adult for help.
- I like to do things that are somewhat scary.
- I generally don't like trying to do new things.
- My parents trust me and give me quite a lot of freedom.
- The world is a dangerous place for kids.

*B. Focus Group Questions for Children. These questions will be discussed by groups of students at the end of each half-year of school. There will be separate groups for those involved in Play Club and those involved in the Let Grow Project. An adult will lead the discussions, which will be recorded and transcripts made. The questions that trigger the discussions will be of the following type:*

- Did you like Play Club (or the Let Grow Project)? Why or why not?
- Do you think Play Club (or the Let Grow Project) changed you in any way? If so, how?
- Do you have any suggestions for improving Play Club (or the Let Grow Project)? If so, what are they?

### **Questionnaires for Parents**

A parent or guardian, for each participating child at the participating schools, will be asked to fill out this questionnaire at home, online if possible—near the beginning, midpoint, and the end of the year. As with the children's questionnaires, this will be done in a manner to maintain anonymity yet coded so as to connect all of the questionnaires that pertain to each child.

*A. In responding to this set of questions, think about how your child has been during the past few weeks. Respond 1 to 5, in which 1 is not at all true and 5 is very true.*

- My child has been HAPPY most of the time.
- My child has quite often been ANXIOUS or STRESSED.
- My child has quite often been LONELY.
- My child quite often been DEPRESSED or SAD.
- My child has often been HELPFUL in doing chores at home.
- My child has been pursuing a hobby (or some self-chosen interest), with passion, with little or no adult involvement.
- My child has been good at taking initiative and organizing his or her own activities.
- My child has been good at solving his or her own problems.
- My child has been good at advocating for himself or herself.

*B. Time engaged in free play.*

To fill these blanks, think about your child's after-school and weekend activities over the most recent three school weeks. Consider *free play* to be any self-chosen and self-directed activity that your child engages in for enjoyment or interest. However, do not include reading or watching television or videos, or activities that are organized or directed by adults, or activities that are part of a before-school or after-school program (such as Play Club).

In all, my child engaged in free play for about \_\_\_\_\_ hrs/week. Of these, approximately \_\_\_\_\_ hrs/week were outdoors with friends other than siblings; \_\_\_\_\_ hrs/week were outdoors alone or with siblings; \_\_\_\_\_ hrs/week were indoors with friends other than siblings (include online play with friends even if the friends were not physically present); and \_\_\_\_\_ hrs/week indoors alone or with siblings (again including computer play).

*C. End of year questions for parents whose children were involved in the Let Grow Project.*

Unlike other questionnaires, this would be presented just at the end of the year and just to parents whose children had been part of the Let Grow Project.

- How do you feel about your child's participation in the Let Grow Project this year? Did it result in any changes in the relationship between you and your child? Did it have any positive or negative impact on your child's development? Please elaborate on your answers to these questions.

**Questionnaires for Teachers**

All teachers in the participating schools will be asked to fill these out, near the midpoint of the year and again near the end of the year. They would not be asked to fill these out near the beginning of the year, as they might not know the children well enough to do so then.

In addition to these data, the study would benefit from use of academic achievement data that the schools collect routinely, such as standardized test scores and grade point averages. It will be interesting to see if participation in the Let Grow programs influences these.

*A. Questions to address for each child in the teacher's homeroom (on scale of 1-5):*

Teachers will be asked to fill out this questionnaire separately for each of their participating students.

- This student performs well academically.
- This student gets along well with other students.
- This student seems to be quite happy.
- This student exhibits considerable anxiety.
- This student is not afraid of doing new things.
- This student is quite innovative or creative.
- This student is emotionally stable and resilient.
- This student is not afraid to speak up in class.
- This student seems to enjoy challenges.

*B. Questions pertaining to school climate (on scale of 1-5, from strongly disagree to strongly agree):* This will be filled out by each teacher in the school in such a way as to preserve anonymity. As part the introduction to this section, teachers would be asked not to include the 2020-21 year when thinking about "previous years," as that was not a normal school year. Teachers new to the school might use their experiences in another school as the baseline for addressing these questions, and those new to teaching might use their expectations from student teaching or other school experiences as a baseline.

- My students this year seem generally to enjoy school more than in previous years.
- My students this year are generally more independent than in previous years.
- My students this year are generally less anxious than in previous years.
- My students this year are generally less needy than in previous years.
- My students this year are generally more socially competent than in previous years.

- My students this year generally participate more actively in class than in previous years.
- I enjoy my job this year more than was true in previous years.
- Overall, this school is a more welcoming place for students than was true in previous years.
- Overall, this school is a more welcoming place for teachers and staff than in previous years.

*C. End-of-year questions for teachers who adopted the Let Grow Project.*

Unlike other questionnaires, this would be presented just at the end of the year and just to teachers whose class participated in Let Grow Project.

- How do you feel about the experience of your class with the Let Grow Project? Overall, do you think that the Let Grow assignments had any significant lasting effects on your students? If so, what effects? Do you plan to continue with this program next year? Why or why not? If you continue, what if any changes are you likely to make in how you manage the program?

**Log to be filled out at each Play Club session by each adult observer of Play Club**

One purpose of this will be to see if interventions decline over time. Another is simply to remind observers not to intervene unless necessary, and yet another is to provide a set of observations about age-mixed interactions and anything that looks like a “breakthrough” for one or more children in Play Club.

1. Did you have to intervene in any way in the children’s activities? If so, please describe what happened, why you felt intervention was needed, and the results of your intervention.
2. Did you notice any fighting, bullying, or other serious problems among the children that were resolved without adult intervention? If so, please describe what happened and how it was resolved.
3. Did you notice any particularly interesting examples of interactions between children who differed in grade by two or more years? If so, please describe briefly.
4. Did you notice any particularly interesting examples of what might be called “social breakthroughs” for kids known to have social difficulties? For example, a shy kid coming out of his or her shell, or an aggressive kid mellowing, or a stigmatized kid being welcomed into play? If so, please describe briefly.

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## **Research Study #2: A Survey and Focus-Group Study of Secondary Students' Perceptions of Sources of School-Induced Distress and of How Schooling Could Be Improved**

Research shows that the mental health of teenagers throughout the United States has been declining over decades and that increased pressures of schooling are a major contributor to that decline. To the degree that those pressures are a cause, they are counterproductive even for purposes of academic achievement, as research shows repeatedly that stress-induced anxiety and depression interfere with such achievement (Pascoe et al, 2020). The primary purpose of the proposed research is to learn, from middle-school and high-school students, about the ways that schooling contributes to their psychological distress and to gather their views about how school practices could be modified to reduce distress and improve learning. There has been much speculation about these questions by educators and other professionals, but rarely have students been consulted for their opinions and suggestions.

This proposal begins with brief literature reviews concerning (a) the declining mental health of adolescents in the US in general and in New Hampshire in particular, (b) the evidence from national studies that school pressures contribute considerably to this decline, and (c) research showing effects of "school climate" on students' mental health. It then describes the specific questions to be addressed by the proposed research and outline a methodology for addressing them.

### **The Declining Mental Health of Adolescents in the US and in NH in Particular**

There is summarized evidence for a continuous, gradual, but overall huge decline in the mental health of teenagers from the 1950s to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Gray, 2011). Perhaps the most convincing evidence comes from analyses of scores on certain clinical questionnaires—especially the Depression scale of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory for Adolescents and Taylor's Manifest Anxiety Scale—that were given to normative groups of adolescents, in unchanged form, over the decades. On the basis of such analyses, Jean Twenge and her colleagues (Twenge et al., 2010) estimated that the percentage of adolescents scoring above the cutoff for a likely diagnosis of a clinically significant anxiety or depressive disorder by the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century was 5 to 8 times what it was in the 1950s. Data tabulated by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) indicate that between 1950 and 2005 the suicide rate

for children under age 15 quadrupled and that for youth age 15 to 19 tripled (see also Hansen & Lang, 2011).

More recent studies show that rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide among teens have continued to increase over years in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, data reported by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2019a) indicates that the percentage of adolescents, age 12 -17, who experienced at least one Major Depressive Episode over a 12-month period increased steadily, from 8.0% in 2010 to 14.4% in 2018, which amounts to an 80% increase in just 8 years. The same report shows that this increase was greater than that for any other age group, though the increase for the 18-25 age group was close: 8.3% in 2010 to 13.8% in 2018. The other groups remained essentially flat: 7.5% in 2010 to 8.0% in 2018 for 26-49-year-olds and 5.6% to 4.5% (a decrease) for age 50 and older. So, between 2010 and 2018, rates of depression increased markedly for people of secondary school age and those of college and early employment age, but not for people older than 25.

Depression and anxiety generally go hand in hand, so it is not surprising that anxiety levels among teenagers have likewise continued to rise in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A survey reported by the National Institute of Mental Health ([here](#)) revealed that anxiety levels in teens were higher than those in adults and that nearly one in three teens had suffered from at least one clinically diagnoseable anxiety disorder. In another study, by the Pew Research Center, 70% of teens (age 13-17) said that depression and anxiety were major problems among young people their age in the community in which they lived (Horowitz & Graf, 2019). This was well above their ranking of any other problems listed in the survey, including bullying, drug addiction, or alcohol consumption, and it was very similar across all categories of family income.

On the basis of research conducted to date, New Hampshire teens appear to be suffering from mental health problems at rates similar to those of the teens in the nation as a whole, or perhaps somewhat higher. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2019b) reported that the percentage of New Hampshire teens (ages 12-17) who experienced a Major Depressive Episode (MPE) over the previous 12 months increased from an average of 10.0% in 2004-2008 to an average of 13.1% in 2013-2017. For U.S. teens (ages 12-17) as a whole, the change was from 8.4% in 2004-2008 to 12.1% in 2013-2017.

The New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services website ([here](#)) presents data, from the CDC, concerning various indices of depression and suicide risk for New Hampshire teens in grades 9-12, separate for each of 13 regions, for 2019. Those data are tabulated in Appendix A to this RFP. The chart shows that, overall, by their own reports, over the previous 12 months, 34.4% of NH teens had “felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities;” that 19.4% “seriously considered attempting suicide;” that 13.7% “made a plan about how they would attempt suicide;” and, most remarkably, that 7.3% actually attempted suicide one or more times. These data varied somewhat by region. Concerning suicide attempt, the highest rates were in Strafford County (9.4%) and the Seacoast region (9.1%) and the lowest were in the South-Central region (4.9%) and Upper Valley region (5.3%).

Concerning completed suicides, there is no found data specifically for school-age teens, but the United Health Foundation ([here](#)) reported that the suicide rates per 100,000 people for youths age 15-24 for New Hampshire were, respectively, 17.5 in 2018 and 23.9 in 2019. By comparison, those for the U.S. as a whole were 13.2 and 14.2. It will be interesting to see if the sharp increase in suicides in this age group for New Hampshire in 2019 relative to the rest of the country signals a trend or is a random statistical blip.

### **The Role of Schooling in the Declining Mental Health of Adolescents**

There are no doubt many reasons for the decline in teens’ mental health over the past six decades (see Gray, 2011), but increased pressures of schooling appear to be one of the major reasons, if not *the* major reason. One obvious change in schooling over these decades has to do with the amount of young people’s time it absorbs, leaving less time for play, hobbies, and other enjoyable self-directed activities.

Between the 1950s and 2010s, the average length of the school year increased by five full weeks (Column Five Media, [here](#)). The length of the school day also increased for many schools, from 6 hours to 7 hours; study periods in secondary school tended to decrease as class hours increased; and homework increased. One study, based on systematic diary reports, showed that just between 1981 and 2003, 7.5 hours per school week was added to the average amount of time that students spent at school plus schoolwork at home (Juster et al., 2004). That's equivalent to adding nearly an entire adult workday to students' weekly schoolwork. Over these same decades, and especially after the 2002 No Child Left Behind Law took effect, increased focus on standardized test scores led to increased standardization in classrooms, decreased freedom for teachers to vary the curriculum to accord with students' needs, decreased opportunities for creative engagement, and hence more stress and tedium in the classroom. It would be surprising if these changes *did not* result in increases in depression and anxiety among students.

Evidence for a relationship between school pressures and deteriorating mental health of students comes not just from correlations over years and decades, but also from correlations within each calendar year. For example, one study showed that the rate of pediatric psychiatric visits for danger to self or others, at a major pediatric emergency department, was more than twice as high during weeks when school was in session than during weeks when school was not in session (Lueck *et al.*, 2015). The same study also showed that the increased rate of admissions from year to year over the four-year duration of the study (2009 – 2013) was entirely the result of increases during school weeks; there was no increase for weeks of vacation from school. Other research, likewise, has shown that, for young people of school age, but for nobody else, the rates of emergency mental health admissions, attempted suicides, and actual suicides are roughly twice as high during weeks when school is in session as they are when school is not in session (Hansen & Lang, 2011; Plemmons *et al.*, 2018).

Perhaps the most direct evidence for harmful effects of schooling on students' mental health comes from students' own reports about the sources of their distress. The *Stress in America* study, conducted by the American Psychological Association (2014), revealed that teens (age 13-17) not only reported higher levels of stress than any other age group but also attributed their stress primarily to school. In response to a question about the sources of their distress, 83% cited school pressures. The next highest source they cited was worry about getting into a good college or deciding what to do after high school (69%). When the survey was conducted during the school year, 27% of teens reported that they had experienced extreme levels of stress over the past month. In contrast, when it was conducted in the summer, in August, only 13% reported extreme levels of stress over the past month.

In another study, in which nearly a thousand teens were asked about sources of their stress, academic pressures again topped the list. Sixty-one percent said they felt *a lot* of pressure to get good grades (Horowitz & Graf, 2019). The next highest sources of "a lot of pressure" were that to fit in socially (28%), to be involved in extracurricular activities (21%), and to be good at sports (21%).

Another approach to assessing the stress of school has been to employ an experience sampling method, in which students are signaled at various times of day, in school or out of school, and asked to report the mood or feelings they had experienced just before the signal came. One such study, of hundreds of middle-school students, revealed that students were less happy in school than in any other setting where they regularly found themselves (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003). Another study, of high-school students, the most frequent feelings reported in school were *tired*, *stressed*, and *bored* (Moeller et al., 2020).

Further, very recent evidence of the distress caused by schooling comes from two large-scale studies of students' adaptations to the pandemic-induced school closures that occurred in the spring of 2020. One demographically balanced study, sponsored by the Let Grow nonprofit, revealed that children age 8 to 13 were, on average, *calmer*, *less anxious*, a month and two months after schools closed than they had been before schools closed (see [here](#) and [here](#) for preliminary reports). Another survey, of students aged 13-14 in the UK, likewise revealed less anxiety after school closure than before (preliminary report [here](#)).

The pandemic no doubt introduced new sources of stress for many, but, overall, the reduction in stress resulting from school closure more than compensated for that.

## **Effects of School Climate on Mental Health and Academic Achievement**

Can the harmful effects of schooling on teens' mental health be reduced by changes in school practices? The best evidence that they can comes from research on *school climate*, which has to do with the qualities of a school as a social environment. As one set of researchers (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017) put, "A positive school climate is the product of a school's attention to fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community. In a positive classroom climate, the teacher fosters a sense of ease and enjoyment by demonstrating positive regard and warmth in interactions with students." Others have noted that schools with a positive social climate are those where everyone involved—students, teachers, administrators, and supportive staff—feel good about being at school.

School climate is assessed through questionnaires, often separate ones for students, teachers, and administrators. Some questionnaires partition school climate into a set of different but related components. For example, one questionnaire develops separate scores for *connectedness* (the degree to which people feel at home and close to others at school), *caring relationships* (the degree to which people at the school care about one another as human beings, regardless of performance), *high expectations* (the degree to which teachers and other adults convey the expectation that students will succeed); and *meaningful participation* (the degree to which students have a voice in what happens in school and willfully participate).

Dozens of research studies have shown significant relationships between positive school climate and beneficial outcomes for students (for an early review, see Thapa *et al.*, 2013). Much of the research has focused on academic achievement, bullying at school, student suspensions, and student absenteeism, as these are the kinds of things that school personnel measure and seem most to care about. By all of these measures, improved school climate has been shown to have a positive impact. One interesting and repeated finding is that positive school climate improves performance for students from low-income families even more than for those from high-income families and thus helps reduce the education gap (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017; Davis & Warner, 2018). This may be because students from poorer families are less likely, initially, to feel at home in school and more likely to be stigmatized than are those from wealthier families, so improved school climate may be especially helpful to them. It is hard to focus academically if you don't feel welcome.

Most relevant to the present proposed research are studies examining the relationship between school climate and students' mental health. Many studies—some correlational and some experimental—have shown positive relationships between school climate and students' mental health. For example, one study, involving many middle schools and high schools, showed that an intervention designed to improve school climate significantly reduced measures of anxiety, depression, alcohol use, and aggression in the students at those schools (Stalker *et al.*, 2018). Another study, involving 121 secondary schools in Los Angeles County, found that students' ratings of school climate (but not teachers' or administrators' ratings) correlated significantly with measures of depression and suicide ideation (Gase *et al.*, 2018). Students at schools that were rated by students as having a positive school climate were less likely to experience a Major Depressive Episode and or have thoughts about committing suicide than those rated by students as having a negative school climate. It is perhaps not surprising that students' ratings of school climate would be more meaningful than teachers' or administrators' ratings in predicting student outcomes.

Another study, which found that positive school climate correlated with greater psychological wellbeing and greater engagement in school, used statistical modeling and path analysis to determine which effect was the more direct one (Lombardi *et al.*, 2019). The researchers concluded that the improvement in engagement was entirely the result of improvement in psychological wellbeing. In other words, school climate improved students' engagement with school lessons (and hence, presumably, their academic



achievement) only to the degree that it improved their overall mental health. We have here an interesting causal chain: Positive school climate → improved mental wellbeing → greater likelihood of becoming engaged with lessons → higher test scores.

One more study worth mentioning assessed the relationship of school climate to depression and suicidal ideation among foster youth attending public high schools in California (Shim-Pelayo & De Pedro, 2018). Foster youth are especially prone to mental health problems and poor school performance. The study revealed, as expected, that ratings of positive school climate correlated, for these youths, with reduced depression and suicidal ideation. When the researchers looked more specifically at different components of school climate, however, they found that the positive relationship to mental health held for *school connection* and the *caring relationships*, but not for *high expectations*. In fact, that component was associated with *more* depression and suicidal ideation, not less. The researchers expressed surprise at this finding, but it should not be surprising in light of other research showing that much of the stress of school comes from pressure to get high grades. “High expectations” might translate into a focus on outcome (grades) rather than process, which could well be stressful, especially for students whose life situation makes it difficult for them to achieve those grades.

## Research Questions

As shown in the preceding review, research has shown that secondary school students are experiencing a high degree of psychological distress, that much of it derives from school, and that a positive school climate can reduce that stress. Among the questions to be addressed by the proposed research are the following:

1. How much distress are secondary students in the target NH schools experiencing?
2. How much of this distress derives from their experiences with school and how much derives from specific categories of experiences outside of school?
3. From students' points of view, in open-ended questions, what are the specific aspects of school that make it unpleasant and stressful? Conversely, what are the specific aspects that make it enjoyable?
4. From students' points of view, how might schools be changed to make the learning experiences more joyful and less distressing?
5. How do the responses to questions 1 through 4 vary depending on (a) the size of the school, (b) year in school (6<sup>th</sup> grade through 12<sup>th</sup>), (c) the students' gender, (d) the students' level of academic performance, and (e) the students' resistance to school authority as assessed by absentees and discipline referrals?

## Overall Research Design

A set of New Hampshire public middle schools and high schools that agree to be part of the study will be selected. This set should include at least two large urban middle schools, two large urban high schools, two relatively small rural middle schools, and two relatively small rural high schools. However, as the survey questionnaire (described below) is relatively easily administered, there may be interest in including many more schools in that part of the study, perhaps sampling schools from every part of the state. The objective questions are easily analyzed electronically, so there is no limit on number that can be involved for them. The open-ended questions will need to be qualitatively analyzed, which takes much time and effort, but some method could be used to analyze those for a subset of the questionnaires completed from each locale.

All participating students in the chosen schools would be asked to fill out, anonymously, a **survey questionnaire** designed to assess (a) their level of depression and anxiety; (b) the degree to which they feel distress deriving from school compared to various other possible sources; (c) their thoughts (in open-ended questions) about the specific aspects of school that are distressing or pleasant and how school could be changed to make it a better learning environment; and (d) their gender, year in school, academic performance, and tendency to resist or not resist authority in school. Parental permission as well as the students' permission would be required, in accordance with requirements of the institutional review board



for the institution conducting the research. The survey could be filled out during a specially designated period at school, maybe as part of a class that everyone takes, if the school agrees. Ideally, it would be filled out electronically, using a standard survey program.

In addition, students from some of the participating schools would be invited to join **focus group meetings** about their experiences with school and their views about how their school (and schools in general) could be improved. This proposal suggests that each such group be uniform in gender and year in school. More specifically, somewhat arbitrarily, that the middle school groups be 7<sup>th</sup> graders and the high school groups be 11<sup>th</sup> graders. Thus, separate focus groups would be created for 7<sup>th</sup> grade girls, 7<sup>th</sup> grade boys, 11<sup>th</sup> grade girls, and 11<sup>th</sup> grade boys. Previous focus-group research with adolescents suggests that same-gender group's work best (Daly, 2013). In mixed-gender groups boys may dominate, shy teens may be even more so, and some responses may be distorted by attempts to impress members of the opposite sex. Separate-gender groups would also allow for comparisons across groups to find potential gender differences in experiences with and views about school. With 8 schools (2 each of urban middle schools, urban high schools, rural middle schools, and rural high schools) and 2 groups from each school (one female, one male), there would be 16 focus group meetings, each with a different set of about 10 students.

Ideally, participating students selected as potential group participants would be approached outside of school, directly from the researchers, perhaps initially by email to the student and, if possible, also a parent. The invitation would include a description of the purpose of the group meeting, the ways that confidentiality would be preserved, and how participation could be enjoyable and help promote improvements in school environments. There might also be some further inducement, such as a voucher that could be used for online purchases. Permission from parents as well as students would be required. Each group, ideally, would consist of 10 members and be led by two trained group leaders, one to moderate and one to take notes, manage recording equipment, and help keep the conversation going. Much has been written about how to conduct focus groups in a manner that makes participants feel at ease, draws everyone out, and does not bias the responses (e.g. Adler *et al.*, 2019; Breen, 2006; Daley, 2013; Nagle & Williams), and the researchers should familiarize themselves with this and practice with trial groups before the final design of the study. Ideally, the groups would meet at a setting outside of school, such as a reserved room in the local public library. The meetings might last 60-70 minutes and would be recorded. Transcripts would be formed from the recordings, perhaps abridged so as to include only material relevant to the questions, and these would be analyzed, to draw out the major ideas emerging from each discussion, using grounded theory analysis or some other standard method for qualitative analysis of verbal data (see Adler *et al.*, 2019).

## The Survey Questionnaire

What follows is a draft of the items that would appear in the questionnaire. Ideally the questionnaire would be formatted to fit into a standard survey program, which students would complete online. The headings (A – F) used here are for explanatory purposes and would not be used in the actual survey questionnaire.

**A. Mental Health Assessment.** A composite score can be created from these two brief standard assessments.

1. *Kutcher 6-Item Adolescent Depression Scale: KADS-6.* Attached as Appendix B. [which as been marked with changes on the attached that are recommended in order to make it more applicable to general population rather than a clinical population.]
2. *APA Severity Measure for Generalized Anxiety for Age 11-17, 10-item scale.* Attached as Appendix C. [I recommend changing “During the past 7 days” to “During the past 4 weeks.”]

## **B. Ratings of Possible Sources of Distress.**

This is modeled after one of the questionnaires in the study reported [here](#) by the PEW Research Center.

As is standard for questionnaires of this sort, the order of the items listed below will vary across questionnaires, so as to eliminate or minimize order effects.

Proposed wording:

*Feelings of stress, or pressure*, which can interfere with the joy of life, can come from various sources. How much stress do you feel from each of the following sources? There are four response choices for each item: *A lot; Quite a bit; Very little; None at all.*

- School
- Home and family
- Relationships with peers (e.g. getting along with other teens, romantic relationships, etc.)
- Adult-led activities beyond school (e.g. extracurriculars, sports, clubs, religious activities, lessons outside of school).
- Your concerns about your future (for example, concerns about getting into college or making a living).
- Something else\*

\*If “something else” produces *a lot or quite a bit* of stress, please explain here what that “something else” is.

## **C. Open-Ended Questions**

1. If school is to some degree a source of unpleasant stress for you, please explain what it is about school that causes that stress.
2. What do you *like* about school? Please explain.
3. What do *dislike* about school? Please explain.
4. If you, by some magic, could change how your school operates, what would you change? Can you think of changes that would make your school a more pleasant and effective learning environment?

## **D. Ratings of Feelings Experienced in School**

Please rate the extent to which you experience each of the following while in school. These may vary from class to class, but try to average them out over your classes in choosing your response.

[Ratings will be on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is *not at all* and 5 is *very much*. The order of terms below will be randomized over questionnaires so as to avoid systematic order effects.]

- Happy
- Interested
- Curious
- Bored
- Tired
- Angry
- Excited
- Anxious (or nervous)
- Sad

## **E. Further individual information**

For each item, check the response choice that is most true for you.

1. Your gender: Male; Female; Other
2. Your present year in school: Grade 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.

3. Your average grade in school classes over the past 12 months: A; A-; B+; B; B-; C+; C; C-; D+; D; D-; F
4. Compared to the average student in your school, how often have you been accused by teachers or administrators of violating a school rule? More than average; About average; Less than Average; Never.
5. Over the past month, how often have you been absent from school without an excuse such as illness or a family obligation? Never; Once; Two to four times; More than four times.

*Note: Questions 3-5 here on the assumption that it will not be possible to use school records on these things in a way that does not jeopardize confidentiality. If there is a way, however, using school records would be better.*

## **Focus Group Protocol**

Participants should sit in a circle, preferably at a round table, so everyone can see everyone.

Open with welcoming and friendly comments/questions (e.g. about the weather, the town they live in, the school's most recent sports victory or defeat, anything to help people feel comfortable). Since everyone in the group will be from the same grade in the same school, they may already all know one another, but, for fun, ask everyone: "If you could choose any first name you wanted, other than your actual name, what would you choose?" Then have them put that on a name tag to wear and ask everyone to use that name throughout the meeting. That will help maintain anonymity in the audio recording when the recorder is turned on.

Remind participants of the purpose of the meeting and the rules they agreed to, including: "Do not repeat, to anyone after this meeting, anything that anyone said here. Confidentiality is crucial." Describe how the researchers will maintain confidentiality. Mention (if it is true) that the teachers and administrators at the school don't even know who is in any of the groups.

Turn on the recorder and start go on with questions. With each question, try to get a variety of responses; use friendly prods to bring in people who are more reserved. Don't hesitate to call on people, in a non-threatening way, such as, "Spiderman, I'm wondering if you some thoughts to add on this." Add follow-up questions, as needed, to flesh out the ideas more fully. Once it seems that everyone's thoughts have been presented and rather fully discussed, follow up with a summary of what was said and ask if that seems like a fair summary. Would anyone like to add anything else? Then go on to the next question.

*Questions for discussion:*

1. What do you most *like* about school? [Note that this will be followed by *dislike*, so please focus here on what you like, not what you dislike.]
2. What do you most *dislike* about school?
3. Lots of research, throughout the United States, suggests that schooling these days is producing a lot of stress—a lot of anxiety and depression—in students your age. Do you think that is true for students in your school? To the degree that it is producing stress, what aspects of school are most stressful? In other words, what is it about school that makes students anxious, or depressed, or in some way feel bad?
4. If you, magically, somehow had the power to change how your school operates, what would you change? How could school be changed to become a more pleasant and effective learning environment than it already is?

At end, thank everyone and tell them how valuable their insights have been (assuming this is true), remind them again of the confidentiality rule. If there is something to give them (e.g. a voucher), give it to them before they leave.

### **Possible Additions That Could Be Added on to This Study**

What is described here is a relatively streamlined and manageable research study. Depending upon funding, the interests of the New Hampshire Department of Education, and the interests of the researchers who carry out the research, this plan could be expanded in any of a number of ways.

### **Attachments**

**Appendix A.** Excel spreadsheet showing indices of depression and suicide ideation among adolescents by region in New Hampshire, and summed for the whole state.

**Appendix B.** 6-Item Kutcher Adolescent Depression Scale, along with suggestion for modifying it.

**Appendix C.** APA Severity Measure for Generalized Anxiety, along with suggestions for modifying it.

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### **Research Study #3: Surveys of Homeschooling Families Aimed at Learning Why They Have Chosen Homeschooling over Public Schooling**

According to data collected every four years by the U.S. Department of Education, the percentage of U.S. families choosing homeschooling for their school-aged children increased considerably in the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, from an estimated 1.7 % in 2000 to an estimated 3.3% in 2016, the last year for which data are available (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2019). The Department surveys also reveal that over this period the percentage of homeschoolers choosing homeschooling for religious reasons declined and the percentage choosing it because of dissatisfaction with the learning environment of public schooling increased. Previous research suggests that many if not most homeschoolers sent at least their first child to public school and then, at some point, removed the child from the public school for homeschooling (Gray & Riley, 2013). If we were to consider schooling as a business, we would have to consider these families to be dissatisfied customers. One route to improving any business that supplies a service is to learn why some customers leave it and others choose never to try it.

Between the time when this study was initially conceived and the development of this draft of a research plan, the number of homeschoolers in the United States increased sharply because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which closed schools in the spring of 2020 and is creating a shaky, variable start to schools in the fall of 2020. The continued threat of the virus, the disruption in the typical operation of schools, and the uncertainty of how schools will operate from day to day and month to month going forth led many new families to register as homeschoolers. A Gallup Poll published August 25, 2020, revealed that 10% of American families with children of school age intended to homeschool their children this year (Brenan, 2020). That's double the percentage that said they were intending to homeschool a year earlier. Michelle Levell, director and cofounder of Granite State Home Educators, confirmed to me in a phone conversation (Sept. 21, 2020) that inquiries about homeschooling have increased greatly in New Hampshire, reflective of what is happening all over the country. It is reasonable to suppose that many families that are starting homeschooling during the pandemic see it as a temporary expedient and plan to return their children to public school when the pandemic ends and schools return to normal operation.

However, some may find that homeschooling works well for their family and stay with it after schools return to normal.

Because of this shift in the makeup of the homeschooling population, we propose here two separate but related surveys, one of “traditional homeschoolers,” who began homeschooling before the 2019-2020 academic year, and one of “pandemic homeschoolers,” who began homeschooling sometime after March 1, 2020, and then stayed with it into the 2021-2022 academic year. On the assumption (which could turn out to be mistaken) that schooling will be back to normal in the 2021-2022 academic year we propose that these surveys both take place during that year.

### **Prior Research on Why Families Choose Homeschooling**

By far the most systematic and scientifically valid evidence for why families choose homeschooling comes from the National Household Education Surveys Program, conducted every four years by the U.S. Department of Education. This is the program referenced in the introduction as showing a doubling in the percentage of family’s homeschooling from the year 2000 to 2016. Those surveys also revealed changes in the demography of homeschoolers over time. Between 2008 and 2016 the percentage of homeschoolers who are Black increased from 4% to 16%, and the percentage Hispanic increased from 10% to 27%. The percentage self-identified as white, non-Hispanic declined from 77% to 49% (McGuiggan & Megra, 2017).

For the purposes of this study, the most significant question in the survey had to do with parents’ reasons for choosing homeschooling. That question listed a set of potential reasons and asked the respondents to check all that were “important” in their decision and to check again the single reason that was “most important.” The reason that came out on top was *concerned about the school environment*, checked as important by 80% of the respondents and most important by 34%. The other reasons listed and checked were: *Dissatisfied with academic instruction* (61%, 17%); *to provide religious instruction* (51%, 16%), *to provide moral instruction* (67%, 5%); *to provide a nontraditional approach to education* (39%, 6%); *Child has special needs* (20%, 6%); *Child has physical or mental disability* (14%, 6%); and *other reasons* (22%, 11%). (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2019).

This is a good start toward understanding why families choose homeschooling, but it leaves many questions unanswered. *School environment* was the biggest concern, but that is a huge umbrella term. It can be construed to include everything that occurs at school. What, more precisely, were the concerns about the school environment? For examples, was it concern about bullying or poor treatment from other children, or from teachers; about too rigid or too lax discipline; or too much or too little homework; or too much or too little freedom for students to play, explore, and express themselves? Similarly, *Dissatisfied with academic instruction* could have many different interpretations. Was it the curriculum that was dissatisfying and, if so, what about the curriculum? Was it the methods of teaching and testing, and if so, what about those? If schools are going to use reasons homeschoolers give for not sending their children to school to contribute to their thoughts about reform, then they need much more specific information than could be extracted from this survey. In order to get at more specific reasons, one would have to ask open-ended questions that allow the respondents to elaborate on their reasons, not rely on a checklist. Also, for the purpose of school reform in New Hampshire, it would be useful to know the reasons that *New Hampshire* families give for homeschooling, which may not be the same as those for the nation as a whole.

A survey of the research literature on homeschooling has revealed no systematic research on reasons for homeschooling beyond the government surveys just discussed. There are many studies of homeschooling *outcomes*, looking, for example, at how homeschoolers perform on academic tests, or in higher education, or on assessments of their social skills, but not of reasons for choosing homeschooling. One can also find many lists of reasons provided by homeschooling advocates for homeschooling (such as [this](#) and [this](#)) but these are informally collected and may well represent the biases of subsets of homeschoolers.

A few years ago, Gina Riley and Peter Gray (Gray & Riley, 2013) conducted a survey of 232 homeschooling families who identified as “unschoolers,” that is, homeschoolers whose method was to allow the students to take charge of their own education—to pursue their own interests and learn in their own ways rather than follow an imposed curriculum. One of the open-ended questions in that survey asked parents to describe and elaborate on the path that led them to homeschooling and unschooling.

Roughly half of the families in that survey started homeschooling/unschooling without first enrolling a child in a public or private school. Those parents generally explained their decision to homeschool in terms of their philosophical beliefs in childhood freedom, their observations of how well their children learned before reaching school age, the high value they placed on family togetherness, and their own past unhappy school experiences when they were students. Some of them identified with “attachment parenting” or “natural parenting,” and viewed homeschooling, especially unschooling, as a natural extension of that.

Families that had tried public schooling before turning to homeschooling had, generally, somewhat different explanations for their decision to homeschool. Most of these parents explained their decision primarily in terms of what they perceived to be a harmful school environment. More specifically, 38% of them referred to the rigidity of school rules or the authoritarian nature of the classroom; 32% referred to the wasted time, the paltry amount of real learning that occurred, and/or the child’s boredom, loss of curiosity, or declining interest in learning induced by the tedium of school; and 32% referred specifically to their child’s unhappiness and/or anxiety induced by school. A limitation of these findings for our present purposes, however, is that the study targeted just one segment of the homeschooling population, those who identified as unschoolers, and it was a self-selected sample, who responded to a general announcement on websites frequented by unschoolers.

## Research Questions

As noted in the introduction, for this research it would be useful to distinguish between *traditional homeschoolers*, who started homeschooling before the COVID-19 pandemic, and *pandemic homeschoolers*, who started after the pandemic-induced school closures in the spring of 2020. Among the traditional homeschoolers, another distinction would also be useful—between those who began homeschooling their children from kindergarten on, with no enrollment in a public (or private) school, and those who enrolled at least one child in a public (or private) school before homeschooling. This leads to three different groups of homeschooling families, and it is reasonable to suppose that the different groups would have, on average, different reasons for homeschooling and possibly different views about public schools and how they could be improved. It would also be interesting to hear from homeschooled children to learn about their views of public schooling, based on their direct previous experience of it or their knowledge or beliefs about it deriving from other sources. So, the primary questions to be addressed by the proposed research are the following:

1. For traditional homeschooling families that never sent a child to a public school, what knowledge or beliefs about public schooling contributed to the parents’ decisions to do that?
2. For traditional homeschooling families that had enrolled at least one child in a public school, what experiences with that schooling contributed to the parents’ decisions to leave public schooling for homeschooling?
3. How do homeschooled children who left public schooling at a time that is clear in their memory evaluate their experiences with public schooling? Are they glad they left public schooling for homeschooling and, if so, why? Similarly, what do homeschooled children who never attended a public school believe about such schooling? Are they happy to be homeschooling rather than attending public school and, if so, why?
4. What changes in public schooling practices might induce traditional homeschooling parents to enroll their children in a public school? (Responses to this question would be analyzed separately for the three

categories of homeschooling parents.) Similarly, what changes might lead homeschooling children to want to return to a public school?

5. For pandemic homeschooling families, what considerations led them to start homeschooling during or after the pandemic-induced closure of schools? How long do they expect to continue with homeschooling? If they plan to continue well after the pandemic disruption of public schooling is over, why is that? How, if at all, has their experience with homeschooling altered their views about the ways that public schooling operates?

6. Do the responses to any of the above questions vary, in any systematic way, depending on the family income and/or educational status of the parents? (It would be useful to know this so any suggestions for school reform resulting from the study would take into account differing needs and perspectives of people from differing economic and educational backgrounds.)

### **Overall Research Design**

An early step in conducting this research would be to identify sets of New Hampshire homeschooling families and invite them to participate. A common procedure in homeschooling research is to make a general announcement through media that homeschoolers attend to and ask for volunteers. This procedure, however, results in a self-selected set of participants that may not adequately represent the larger population of homeschoolers. A better procedure would be to obtain lists of homeschoolers containing directory information and then approach families directly to invite them to participate. Of course, families would still have the right not to participate, but the likelihood of recruiting a representative cross-section of homeschoolers is much greater this way than relying on responses to a general announcement. Moreover, with this procedure it is possible to determine the rate of participation and include that in reports of the results.

In New Hampshire, homeschoolers can register with any of three different participating agencies—the commissioner of education, the local district superintendent, or the principal of a private school. According to the Coalition for Responsible Home Education report on New Hampshire ([here](#)) most families register with the local school district. Therefore, the proposal is that the research begin by identifying a set of school districts that are willing to participate and are, collectively, representative of New Hampshire school districts as a whole. To participate, the superintendent would only need to provide the researchers with a directory list of homeschoolers registered in that district. According to FERPA regulations ([here](#)), schools are free to give out directory lists of students without first gaining permission from the students or parents, and it is assumed that this regulation would apply to directory lists of homeschooling families. The FERPA guidelines note that directory information typically includes names and contact information and can include other information such as birth dates, dates of attendance, and participation in officially recognized activities and sports. It would be useful if the directory lists for this study included the date that each family first registered for homeschooling and the birth dates of the children.

After obtaining the lists of homeschooling families, the next step would be to create a selection of candidate families for the research and then contact those families to invite them to participate. The aim would be to identify a set of approximately 300 families for the study, roughly evenly divided across the three categories defined earlier—traditional homeschoolers that never sent a child to public school, traditional homeschoolers that sent at least one child to public school before starting homeschooling, and pandemic homeschoolers (those who started homeschooling sometime after the initial pandemic lockdown of schools in New Hampshire in the spring of 2020). The initial contacts might be by email from the researchers, explaining the purpose and value of the study and inviting participation. If funding for the research provides the possibility of a financial incentive or some other prize for participating also noted in the invitation. In cases where there is no response to the email, and to a repeat email, this might be followed with a phone call. The goal would be to obtain a high rate of agreement to participate. The final step in agreement would involve an IRB-approved statement concerning the nature of the study, any possible risks involved, ways that anonymity will be protected, and assurance that participant can quit at



any time if they choose, which would need to be signed by the parents and any children who would be surveyed. This form could be attached to the survey questionnaire itself.

Ideally, the survey questionnaires would be filled out online using a standard survey format that provides opportunity to type in responses to open-ended questions, but the option of paper surveys, provided by mail, would be available for families that prefer or might need that option. The open-ended survey responses would be analyzed qualitative following the principles of grounded theory analysis.

## **The Survey Questionnaires**

This proposal suggests using three separate survey questionnaires: One for parents in traditional homeschooling families, which would have some questions distinguishing between those who began with homeschooling and those who homeschooled sometime after enrolling a child in a public school; one for parents in pandemic homeschooling families; and one for children who are between 12 and 17 years old. The children's questionnaires would be analyzed separately for those in the traditional homeschool group and the pandemic group.

What follows are drafts of the items that would appear in the questionnaires, which will likely be organized and presented differently in the formatted surveys.

### ***Questionnaire A, for Traditional Homeschooling Parents***

This is for parents in families that began homeschooling sometime before the pandemic closure of schools. This proposal suggests that they be families that began homeschooling any time before January 1, 2018, so they would have had at least two years of homeschooling experience before the pandemic.

1. Please list the sex, birth date (month & year), & current schooling status (*homeschooled; enrolled in public school; enrolled in private school*) of each of your children who is currently of school age (age 5 through 17). Please use this format and, if more than one child, list in order from oldest to youngest:
  - Male, 9/2010, currently homeschooled.
2. If your family chose homeschooling right from the beginning—that is, if none of your children attended a public or private school before homeschooling—please explain that decision:
  - (a) Why did you conclude then that homeschooling would be a better option than sending them to school?
  - (b) Have your reasons for continuing to homeschool changed over time, and if so, how?
3. If one or more of your children attended a school before homeschooling, why did you decide to remove that child from school for homeschooling? Please include the following in your response:
  - (a) What grade in school was the child in at the time of the decision to remove the child from school?
  - (b) Please explain any ways that the schooling experience seemed to cause physical or emotional harm to your child or was counterproductive to a satisfactory education. Please be as specific as you can in these explanations.
  - (c) Please explain also what initially attracted you to homeschooling when you made the decision to do so.
  - (d) Have your reasons for continuing to homeschool changed over time after your initial decision, and if so how?
4. What are the main *advantages* of homeschooling for your child or children and for your family as a whole? Please respond to this by listing the advantages (in as much detail as you would like), beginning with the most important advantage and continuing on to less important.
5. What are the main *disadvantages* or challenges of homeschooling for your child or children and for your family as a whole? Again, a list beginning with the biggest disadvantage would be most helpful.

6. Can you imagine any changes that could be made in how your local public school operates that would encourage you to enroll your child in that school? If so, please elaborate on what those changes would be. Feel free to be creative while remaining within the boundaries of what seems possible.

7. Background information:

a. Relationship of person filling out this questionnaire to the homeschooled child or children. Check one:  
Mother, Father, Legal Guardian other than mother or father

b. What is your (the parent or guardian filling out this questionnaire) highest educational degree? Check one:

-Did not graduate from high school.

-High school graduate.

-Some college.

-A college associate degree.

-A college bachelor's degree.

-A postgraduate degree.

c. If another parent or guardian lives in the household or is regularly involved in the children's lives, what is that person's highest educational degree? Check one:

-Did not graduate from high school.

-High school graduate.

-Some college.

-A college associate degree.

-A college bachelor's degree.

-A postgraduate degree.

d. Please check the box that best describes the annual family income—averaged roughly over the past four years—for your family.

-Less than \$25,000.

-\$25,000 to \$50,000

-\$50,000 to \$75,000

-\$75,000 to \$100,000

-\$100,000 to \$200,000.

-\$200,000 to \$400,00.

-More than \$400,000.

### **Questionnaire B, for Pandemic Homeschooling Parents**

This is for parents in families that began homeschooling sometime during the period when the pandemic was disrupting normal school operations. We suggest that they be parents who first began homeschooling sometime between March 1, 2020, and the time when the COVID-19 pandemic subsided to such a degree that there was little likelihood of further school disruption because of it (a date yet to be determined).

1. Please list the sex, birth date (month & year), & current schooling status (*homeschooled; enrolled in public school; enrolled in private school*) of each of your children who is currently of school age (age 5 through 17). Please use this format and, if more than one child, list in order from oldest to youngest:

- Male, 9/2010, currently homeschooled.

2. Did the COVID-19 pandemic, with school closures, play a role in your decision to homeschool? If it did, please describe how it influenced that decision. Would you be homeschooling now if the pandemic had not happened? Please describe all the main reasons that led to homeschool.

3. What do you now see as the main *advantages* of homeschooling for your child or children and for your family as a whole? Please respond to this by listing the advantages (in as much detail as you would like), beginning with the most important advantage and continuing on to less important.
4. What are the main *disadvantages* or challenges of homeschooling for your child or children and for your family as a whole? Again, a list beginning with the biggest disadvantage would be most helpful.
5. Do you expect that you will, at some point in the future, enroll your currently homeschooled child or children in a public school? Please explain why you do or do not expect this.
6. Can you imagine any changes that could be made in how your local public school operates that would encourage you to enroll your child in that school? If so, please elaborate on what those changes would be. Feel free to be creative while remaining within the boundaries of what seems possible.
7. Background information:
  - a. Relationship of person filling out this questionnaire to the homeschooled child or children. Check one:  
Mother, Father, and Legal Guardian other than mother or father
  - b. What is your (the parent or guardian filling out this questionnaire) highest educational degree? Check one:
    - Did not graduate from high school.
    - High school graduate.
    - Some college.
    - A college associate degree.
    - A college bachelor's degree.
    - A postgraduate degree.
  - c. If another parent or guardian lives in the household or is regularly involved in the children's lives, what is that person's highest educational degree? Check one:
    - Did not graduate from high school.
    - High school graduate.
    - Some college.
    - A college associate degree.
    - A college bachelor's degree.
    - A postgraduate degree.
  - d. Please check the box that best describes the annual family income—averaged roughly over the past four years—for your family.
    - Less than \$25,000.
    - \$25,000 to \$50,000
    - \$50,000 to \$75,000
    - \$75,000 to \$100,000
    - \$100,000 to \$200,000.
    - \$200,000 to \$400,00.
    - More than \$400,000.

**Questionnaire C, for Homeschooled Students age 12 through 17**

This questionnaire is for homeschooled students aged 12 through 17 in all three categories of homeschooled families.

1. Background information.
  - a. Your gender. Check one: Male, Female

b. Your age. Check one: 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17

c. Did you attend a public or private school at a grade level of kindergarten or above before starting to homeschool? Check the the answer that best applies:

-No

-Yes, I attended a public school.

-Yes, I attended a private school.

If your answer here is “no,” please skip to Question 4.

2. If you attended a school before starting homeschooling, for what grades did you attend? For example, if you attended just for kindergarten say kindergarten; if you attended for kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade, say that.

3. If you attended a school before starting homeschooling and have a relatively clear memory of that schooling, please describe here what you *liked* and what you *did not like* about that experience. Please be as specific as you can in describing these.

4. Please describe here, as specifically as you can, what you like about being homeschooled. Please respond to this by listing what you like about homeschooling (in as much detail as you would like), beginning with what you like most.

5. Please describe here, as specifically as you can, what you *dislike* about being homeschooled. Again, a list beginning with what you dislike the most would be most helpful.

6. Can you imagine any changes that could be made in how the local public school operates that would encourage you to enroll in that school (assuming your parents agreed)? If so, please explain what those changes would be. Feel free to be creative while remaining within the boundaries of what seems possible.

### **Possible Additional Research That Could Be Tacked on to This Study**

What is described here is a relatively streamlined and manageable research study. Depending upon funding, the interests of the New Hampshire Department of Education, and the interests of the researchers who carry out the research, this plan could be expanded in any of a number of ways.

One possible expansion, which could be especially interesting and useful, would be to supplement the written surveys by conducting more extensive interviews with a sample of the families, perhaps including a sample from each of the three categories of homeschooling families described in this proposal. The advantage of interviews is that a skilled interviewer can probe more deeply by asking follow-up questions to gain more elaborate and detailed descriptions of, for example, reasons for not sending children to the public school or advantages and disadvantages of homeschooling for the family. Such interviews could be done with one parent alone, or with two parents together (when that is possible), or with the whole family, including children. There would be advantages and disadvantages in any of these approaches. This proposal tends to favor interviewing the whole family together, as that is likely to generate interesting discussion and sharing of views.

Another possible expansion would be to extend the study over time, so it would be to some degree longitudinal. This might be especially interesting to do with the pandemic homeschooling families. It would be interesting to follow up a year later, and perhaps again a year after that, to discover how many of them stick with homeschooling and how many return to public schooling and why they made those choices. It might also be interesting to follow the traditional homeschooling families over several years with a very brief questionnaire to find out which families stick with homeschooling and which eventually send children to a public school and their reasons for those decisions.

The questionnaires presented here could be expanded in any of a number of ways to address new questions. This proposal focuses on homeschoolers' views of public schooling and why homeschooling parents have chosen not to enroll their children, but the New Hampshire Department of Education might be interested in other questions as well. For example, since the state allows homeschoolers to engage in certain school-sponsored activities, such as school athletic teams, to what extent do homeschoolers make use of those opportunities? What other interactions with public schools might homeschoolers enjoy and benefit from if they were possible? Are programs that allow some mix of partial public schooling and homeschooling possible and desired?

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## **Additional Services to be Provided by Contractor**

Submit the selected research proposal(s) to an Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. In the event that the IRB suggests amending any of the components, these changes must be submitted to the DOE Commissioner Frank Edelblut for additional approval prior to the start of each study.

Methodology must be compliant with IRB regulations and NH Law (RSA 186:11)

Research Study 1: in accordance with IRB approval, contractor will conduct Research Study 1, and submit to the DOE a publishable research paper for peer review in IMRad format no later than 30 days after the conclusion of the study.

Research Study 2: in accordance with IRB approval, contractor will conduct Research Study 2 and submit to the DOE a publishable research paper for peer review in IMRad format no later than 30 days after the conclusion of the study.

Research Study 3: in accordance with IRB approval, contractor will conduct Research Study 3, and submit to the DOE a publishable research paper for peer review in IMRad format no later than 30 days after the conclusion of the study.

**Reporting** The successful applicant shall provide the Bureau of Student Wellness with the following:

Monthly Reporting: Reports to be submitted will outline a) activities conducted; b) how the project Meets Services to be Provided;

Project Completion Report: Report detailing the accomplishments and challenges of the project, based on the evaluation of the project, due 30 days after the completion of the project. This report will include a comprehensive overview of the entire project and will be used to determine a contract amendment for continuing services, if applicable.

## **Section 4 – Process for Submitting a Proposal**

In order to provide bidders with the opportunity to present a comprehensive response to this RFP, no page limit has been established. Applicants are reminded that successful applications are typically clear, concise, and well organized. It is strongly recommended that applications be organized around the elements listed in subsection 2.0 and further addressed in the information packet. Supplementary materials may be submitted as part of the application; however, these should be limited to items that substantively explain or expand upon information presented in the basic application. All supplementary materials should be referenced with the basic application. Four (4) sets of any supplementary material should be submitted.

Qualified applicants may be asked to provide the Department with additional written materials or documentation of qualifications, and may be asked to meet with Department Administrators or their designee to discuss their proposal.

Each bidder shall submit, along with the formal proposal, a completed/signed “Alternate W-9 Form” (see Attachment B).

Each bidder shall submit, along with the formal proposal, a completed/signed “Cover Page” (see Attachment C).

Proposals submitted in response to this RFP must be received by the Office of Social and Emotional Wellness no later than the time and date specified in the Schedule section, herein. Proposals may be submitted by U.S. Mail, Delivery Service, and one copy must be delivered electronically in PDF format.

Proposals must be addressed to:

**State of New Hampshire Department of Education**  
Office of Social and Emotional Wellness  
Jen Doris  
101 Pleasant Street  
Concord, N.H. 03301

Unless waived as a non-material deviation in accordance with Section 6B, late submissions will not be accepted and will be returned to the proposers unopened. Delivery of the Proposals shall be at the Proposer's expense. The time of receipt shall be considered when a Proposal has been officially documented by the Agency, in accordance with its established policies, as having been received at the location designated above. The Agency accepts no responsibility for mislabeled mail or mail that is not delivered or undeliverable for whatever reason. Any damage that may occur due to shipping shall be the Proposer's responsibility.

All Proposals submitted in response to this RFP must consist of at least:

One (1) original and four (4) clearly identified copies of the Proposal, including all required attachments;  
One (1) original and two (2) clearly identified electronic copies of the Proposal, including all required attachments contained on digital media such as email, cloud drive etc.

Proposers who are ineligible to bid on proposals, bids or quotes issued by the Department of Administrative Services, Division of Procurement and Support Services pursuant to the provisions of RSA 21-I:11-c shall not be considered eligible for an award under this proposal.

## **B. Proposal Inquiries**

All inquiries concerning this RFP, including but not limited to, requests for clarifications, questions, and any changes to the RFP, shall be submitted via email to the following RFP designated Points of Contact: Jennifer Doris [Jennifer.f.Doris@doe.nh.gov](mailto:Jennifer.f.Doris@doe.nh.gov)

CC: Frank Edelblut [Louis.F.Edelblut@doe.nh.gov](mailto:Louis.F.Edelblut@doe.nh.gov)

Inquiries must be received by the Agency's RFP Points of Contact no later than the conclusion of the Proposer Inquiry Period (see Schedule section, herein). Inquiries received later than the conclusion of the Proposer Inquiry Period shall not be considered properly submitted and may not be considered.

The Agency intends to issue official responses to properly submitted inquiries on or before the date specified in the Schedule section, herein; however, this date is subject to change at the Agency's discretion. The Agency may consolidate and/or paraphrase questions for sufficiency and clarity. The Agency may, at its discretion, amend this RFP on its own initiative or in response to issues raised by inquiries, as it deems appropriate. Oral statements, representations, clarifications, or modifications concerning the RFP shall not be binding upon the Agency.

Official responses by the Agency will be made only in writing by the process described above. Vendors shall be responsible for reviewing the most updated information related to this RFP before submitting a proposal.

**C. Restriction of Contact with Agency Employees**

From the date of release of this RFP until an award is approved by the Governor and Counsel regarding the selection of a Proposer, all communication with personnel employed by or under contract with the Agency regarding this RFP is forbidden unless first approved by the RFP Points of Contact listed in the Proposal Inquiries section, herein. Agency employees have been directed not to hold conferences and/or discussions concerning this RFP with any potential contractor during the selection process, unless otherwise authorized by the RFP Points of Contact. Proposers may be disqualified for violating this restriction on communications.

**D. Validity of Proposal**

Proposals must be valid for one hundred and eighty (180) days following the deadline for submission of Proposals in Schedule of Events, or until the Effective Date of any resulting Contract, whichever is later.

**Section 5 - Content and Requirements for a Proposal**

- I. Introduction
- II. Discussion of your interest in the study/studies
- III. Credentials of applicant/affiliated institution etc.
- IV. Previous experience with research in the social sciences and publication(s)
- V. Institutional supports available
- VI. Specify how you would approach and conduct the study (including information about the team involved and any modifications you propose prior to IRB submission)
- VII. A timeline for completion of each research study
- VIII. Discussion of how you would turn your selected proposal (s) , as currently written, into specific projects with research fidelity measures, and statistical approaches.
- IX. Provide an itemized budget specifying the costs of the project for each research study
- X. Foreseeable challenges and how you would approach them.

**Section 6 Evaluation of Proposals**

TECHNICAL PROPOSAL with the following potential maximum scores for each Technical Proposal category

| CATEGORIES   | POINTS |
|--|--------|
| Have knowledge of, and experience with survey methodology  | 5      |
| Possess knowledge of, and experience with both quantitative and qualitative analysis of survey results | 5      |



|  |            |
|--|------------|
| Turn each selected proposal, as currently written, into specific projects with research fidelity measures, and statistical approaches. | 40         |
| Provide an itemized budget specifying the costs of the project;  | 20         |
| Experience with focus group methodology or partner with someone with such experience.  | 5          |
| Specify a timeline for completion.   | 15         |
| Foreseeable challenges and how you would approach them   | 10         |
| <b>TOTAL POTENTIAL MAXIMUM POINTS AWARDED</b>  | <b>100</b> |

**B. Planned Evaluations**

The Agency plans to use the following process:

- Initial screening to ensure that the Proposals are in compliance with submission requirements;
- Preliminary evaluation of the Proposals;
- Oral interviews (if needed)
- Final Evaluation of Technical Proposals and scoring;
- Final Evaluation
- Review of Price Proposals and final scoring;
- Best and Final Offer (BAFO), if appropriate; and
- Select the highest scoring Proposer (s) and begin contract negotiation.

**C. Initial Screening**

The Agency will conduct an initial screening step to verify Proposer compliance with the technical submission requirements set forth in the RFP and the minimum content set forth in Section 5 of this RFP. The Agency may waive or offer a limited opportunity to cure immaterial deviations from the RFP requirements if it is determined to be in the best interest of the State.

**D. Preliminary Technical Scoring of Proposals**

The Agency will establish an evaluation team to initially score the Technical Proposals. This evaluation team will review the technical proposals and give a preliminary score to the technical proposals under the guidelines set forth in Section 6. Price proposals will remain sealed during the initial technical scoring.

**E. Oral Interviews and Product Demonstrations**

The purpose of oral interviews and product demonstrations is to clarify and expound upon information provided in the written Proposals. Proposers are prohibited from altering the basic substance of their Proposals during the oral interviews and product demonstrations. The Agency may ask the Proposer to

provide written clarifications of elements in their Technical Proposal regardless of whether it intends to conduct Oral Interviews.

Information gained from oral interviews and product demonstrations will be used to refine technical review scores assigned from the initial review of the Proposals.

#### **F. Final Technical Scoring of Proposals**

Following Oral Interviews, Product Demonstrations, Reference Checks (if appropriate) and/or review of written clarifications of proposals requested by the Agency, the evaluation team will determine a final score for each Technical Proposal.

#### **G. Price Proposal Review**

Price proposals will be reviewed upon completion of the final technical scoring of proposals. The Proposer's Price Proposal will be allocated a maximum potential score of 100 points. Proposers are advised that this **is not a low bid award** and that the scoring of the price proposal will be combined with the scoring of the technical proposal to determine the overall highest scoring Proposer.

#### **H. No Best and Final Offer**

Upon completion of the scoring process outlined in Section 6, the Agency may, at its sole option, invite the highest scoring Proposers to submit a "Best and Final Offer" for the Agency's consideration. The Agency reserves the right to select the Proposer based solely on the initial proposals and is under no obligation to solicit or accept a BAFO from any proposers. As the Agency may not request a Best and Final Offer, Proposers are encouraged to provide their most competitive prices in their initial proposals. The Best and Final Offer (BAFO) is a one-time invitation only process for a proposer to submit its lowest priced offer for the Agency's consideration. In its invitation to submit a BAFO, the Agency will provide a deadline submission date for the BAFO. The Agency may communicate in writing any price/cost targets that the Agency is seeking in the BAFO. If such target(s) is provided, the Agency will do so uniformly to all Proposers selected to participate in the BAFO. All restrictions on contact with State employees outlined in Section 4C shall remain in effect for the BAFO period.

Each invited Proposer may only make one BAFO. The BAFO may not alter the substance of the Proposer's technical proposal. The BAFO may only amend the Proposer's initial price proposal. To the extent the Agency solicits and receives a BAFO pursuant to this section, the Agency will re-score the BAFO participants' price proposals after review of the BAFO in accordance with section 6G (Calculation of the Price Proposal Score). The Agency will not select a Proposer based on the lowest priced BAFO proposal. A final selection, if any, shall be based on the combined score of the technical proposal and BAFO price proposal. Only those Proposers who were invited to submit a BAFO will be considered for the award.

#### **I. Final Selection**

The Agency will conduct a final selection based on the final evaluation of the initial proposals or, if requested, as a result of the Best and Final Offer and begin contract negotiations with the selected Proposer(s).

#### **J. Rights of the Agency in Accepting and Evaluating Proposals**

*This section sets forth the important rights that the State is reserving to itself during the RFP process. As indicated throughout this document, the RFP is a fairly formalized and*

structured process. This section provides some level of flexibility to the State in conducting the process. An agency must be careful in exercising these rights and should ensure that the agency continues to act in a balanced way with all proposers.

**- Independent Investigations** – Generally the scoring of the proposals should be made on the basis of what has been submitted in the proposal documents. The evaluation committee, however, is often made up of subject matter experts on the item being procured. This provision allows the Evaluation Committee to: 1.) Take into account knowledge which is within the body of the committee in evaluating proposals, and 2.) Make investigations that will assist the committee in understanding the proposals. Utilizing these “outside resources” must be done in an even-handed manner.

To the extent the committee reaches out beyond the proposals to gain information or receives information which informs their decision, they should make every effort to do so in an equitable manner. Equitable, however, does not mean it needs to be exactly the same. For example, if there is a procurement with two solutions offered where one is the incumbent solution and well known to the agency while the other is a relatively novel solution, the committee may look to other resources to learn more about the pros and cons of the new solution. It does not need to go through the process of investigating the solution that they already know very well. Conversely, if an agency received three solutions, one incumbent and two of which are relatively unknown to the State, the committee would want to make comparable investigations of the solutions that are not known to them.

If the Evaluation Committee has questions about the propriety of considering outside information, it should consult with the DOJ Procurement Attorney.

**-Request for Additional Information to Clarify Proposal** – The committee may reach out to get a clarification of an element of a proposal. This should be done in writing or at the oral interview phase of the RFP process. It should always be noted in these communications that a request for clarification is not an opportunity to change the substance of a proposal. The most common reason for a clarification would be a perceived typo, an inconsistency within the proposal, or a term or phrase which is unclear or undefined. The agency should not use a written clarification process for significant substantive issues in the proposal, such as “The solution in Section 3 does not interface with the required state infrastructure. Please clarify your solution.” Such a question is not a clarification, but rather is asking for a change in the substance of the proposal. The line between a clarification and a request for a revision can become unclear. The agency should request guidance from the DOJ if it is unsure of whether the request falls under its rights to clarify the proposal.

**-Omit Evaluation Steps** – There may be procurements where it becomes clear that some of the planned steps will have no bearing on the eventual award of the contract. For example, after the initial evaluation of the proposals, it may become clear that only one proposer will be deemed eligible for an award. In this circumstance, the agency can preserve both its own resources and the resources of the proposers by skipping oral interviews, and further technical evaluations. Before deciding to omit steps, the agency should be clear that the skipped steps will have no impact on the eventual award of the contract.

**-Reject Any and All Proposals At Any Time** – The agency retains control over the RFP process at all times and is not obligated to make an award. While this provision allows for rejection of any or all proposals for any reason, in practice this is exercised most often to reject all proposals because the agency does not wish to continue with the RFP process. The most common reasons for halting the RFP process is that the agency realizes it has overlooked or miscalculated some component of the RFP,

*circumstances have changed and the contract is no longer necessary, or funding for the project has changed and the scope of work needs to be revised. This right should be exercised when it is in the best interest of the State and not as a means of controlling the outcome of the RFP process. Great caution should be made in exercising the right to reject one/some but not all of the proposers, unless there are other grounds to do so under the RFP.*

**- Open Contract Discussions with the Next Highest Bidder** – *At the conclusion of the RFP process there should be a selected proposer, an established price and set of terms and conditions and scope of work. There may be some minor issues that need to be resolved in formulating a final contract. If for some reason negotiations with the top scorer do not result in a contract, despite reasonable efforts made in good faith, the State may go to the next highest scorer and seek to negotiate with them. At all times negotiations should not materially change the terms, conditions and work that was advertised in the RFP. Prior to engaging the next highest scoring proposer, the agency should seek guidance from the DOJ procurement attorney to ensure that all reasonable efforts have been exhausted with the highest scoring bidder.*

The Agency reserves the right to:

- Make independent investigations in evaluating Proposals;
- Request additional information to clarify elements of a Proposal;
- Waive minor or immaterial deviations from the RFP requirements, if determined to be in the best interest of the State;
- Omit any planned evaluation step if, in the Agency's view, the step is not needed;
- At its sole discretion, reject any and all Proposals at any time; and
- Open contract discussions with the second highest scoring Proposer and so on, if the Agency is unable to reach an agreement on Contract terms with the higher scoring Proposer(s).

## **Section 7 – Terms and Conditions Related To The RFP Process**

### **A. RFP Addendum**

The Agency reserves the right to amend this RFP at its discretion, prior to the Proposal submission deadline. In the event of an addendum to this RFP, the Agency, at its sole discretion, may extend the Proposal submission deadline, as it deems appropriate.

### **B. Non-Collusion**

The Proposer's signature on a Proposal submitted in response to this RFP guarantees that the prices, terms and conditions, and Work quoted have been established without collusion with other Proposers and without effort to preclude the Agency from obtaining the best possible competitive Proposal.

### **C. Property of the Agency**

All material received in response to this RFP shall become the property of the State and will not be returned to the proposer. Upon Contract award, the State reserves the right to use any information presented in any Proposal.

#### **D. Confidentiality of a Proposal**

Unless necessary for the approval of a contract, the substance of a proposal must remain confidential until the Effective Date of any Contract resulting from this RFP. A Proposer's disclosure or distribution of Proposals other than to the Agency will be grounds for disqualification.

#### **E. Public Disclosure**

Pursuant to RSA 21-G:37, all responses to this RFP shall be considered confidential until the award of a contract. At the time of receipt of proposals, the Agency will post the number of responses received with no further information. No later than five (5) business days prior to submission of a contract to the Department of Administrative Services pursuant to this RFP, the Agency will post the name, rank or score of each proposer. In the event that the contract does not require Governor & Executive Council approval, the Agency shall disclose the rank or score of the Proposals at least 5 business days before final approval of the contract.

The content of each Proposer's Proposal shall become public information upon the award of any resulting Contract. Any information submitted as part of a response to this request for proposal (RFP) may be subject to public disclosure under RSA 91-A. In addition, in accordance with RSA 9-F:1, any contract entered into as a result of this RFP will be made accessible to the public online via the website Transparent NH (<http://www.nh.gov/transparentnh/>). However, business financial information and proprietary information such as trade secrets, business and financials models and forecasts, and proprietary formulas may be exempt from public disclosure under RSA 91-A:5, IV. If you believe any information being submitted in response to this request for proposal, bid or information should be kept confidential as financial or proprietary information; you must specifically identify that information in a letter to the agency, and must mark/stamp each page of the materials that you claim must be exempt from disclosure as "CONFIDENTIAL". A designation by the Proposer of information it believes exempt does not have the effect of making such information exempt. The Agency will determine the information it believes is properly exempted from disclosure. Marking of the entire Proposal or entire sections of the Proposal (e.g. pricing) as confidential will neither be accepted nor honored.

Notwithstanding any provision of this RFP to the contrary, Proposer pricing will be subject to disclosure upon approval of the contract. The Agency will endeavor to maintain the confidentiality of portions of the Proposal that are clearly and properly marked confidential.

If a request is made to the Agency to view portions of a Proposal that the Proposer has properly and clearly marked confidential, the Agency will notify the Proposer of the request and of the date the Agency plans to release the records. By submitting a Proposal, Proposers agree that unless the Proposer obtains a court order, at its sole expense, enjoining the release of the requested information, the Agency may release the requested information on the date specified in the Agency's notice without any liability to the Proposers.

#### **F. Non-Commitment**

Notwithstanding any other provision of this RFP, this RFP does not commit the Agency to award a Contract. The Agency reserves the right, at its sole discretion, to reject any and all Proposals, or any

portions thereof, at any time; to cancel this RFP; and to solicit new Proposals under a new acquisition process.

### **G. Proposal Preparation Cost**

By submitting a Proposal, a Proposer agrees that in no event shall the Agency be either responsible for or held liable for any costs incurred by a Proposer in the preparation of or in connection with the Proposal, or for Work performed prior to the Effective Date of a resulting Contract.

### **H. Ethical Requirements**

From the time this RFP is published until a contract is awarded, no bidder shall offer or give, directly or indirectly, any gift, expense reimbursement, or honorarium, as defined by RSA 15-B, to any elected official, public official, public employee, constitutional official, or family member of any such official or employee who will or has selected, evaluated, or awarded an RFP, or similar submission. Any bidder that violates RSA 21-G:38 shall be subject to prosecution for an offense under RSA 640:2. Any bidder who has been convicted of an offense based on conduct in violation of this section, which has not been annulled, or who is subject to a pending criminal charge for such an offense, shall be disqualified from bidding on the RFP, or similar request for submission and every such bidder shall be disqualified from bidding on any RFP or similar request for submission issued by any state agency. A bidder that was disqualified under this section because of a pending criminal charge which is subsequently dismissed, results in an acquittal, or is annulled, may notify the department of administrative services, which shall note that information on the list maintained on the state's internal intranet system, except in the case of annulment, the information, shall be deleted from the list.

### **I. Challenges on Form or Process of the RFP**

Any challenges regarding the validity or legality of the form and procedures of this RFP, including but not limited to the evaluation and scoring of Proposals, shall be brought to the attention of the Agency at least ten (10) business days prior to the Proposal Submission Deadline. By submitting a proposal, the Proposer is deemed to have waived any challenges to the agency's authority to conduct this procurement and the form and procedures of this RFP.

## **Section 8 – Contract Terms and Award**

### **A. Non-Exclusive Contract**

Any resulting Contract from this RFP will be a non-exclusive Contract. The State reserves the right, at its discretion, to retain other Contractors to provide any of the Services or Deliverables identified under this procurement or make an award by item, part or portion of an item, group of items, or total Proposal. **For example, of the three projects, they may all be awarded to one Contractor, or each to a separate Contractor or any other combination of award.**

### **B. Award**

If the State decides to award a contract as a result of this RFP process, any award is contingent upon approval of the Contract by Governor and Executive Council of the State of New Hampshire and upon continued appropriation of funding for the contract.

### **C. Standard Contract Terms**

The Agency will require the successful bidder to execute a Contract using the Standard Terms and Conditions of the State of New Hampshire which is attached as Appendix A.

The Term of the Contract will be for 1 year from the date of approval. The contract term may be extended by an additional term of 1 year at the sole option of the State, subject to the parties' prior written agreement on terms and applicable fees for each extended term. contingent upon satisfactory vendor performance, continued funding and Governor and Executive Council approval.

To the extent that a Proposer believes that exceptions to the standard form contract will be necessary for the Proposer to enter into the Agreement, the Proposer should note those issues during the Proposer Inquiry Period. The Agency will review requested exceptions and accept, reject or note that it is open to negotiation of the proposed exception at its sole discretion. If the Agency accepts a Proposer's exception the Agency will, at the conclusion of the inquiry period, provide notice to all potential proposers of the exceptions which have been accepted and indicate that exception is available to all potential proposers. Any exceptions to the standard form contract that are not raised during the proposer inquiry period are waived. In no event is a Proposer to submit its own standard contract terms and conditions as a replacement for the State's terms in response to this solicitation.