

Lice and the School Community

A Rationale for Change

Background

Head lice infestation is common in this country among children 3 to 12 years old; 6 to 12 million cases are discovered each year (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002). In spite of the fact that head lice are not known to cause any disease (Pollack, 2000), it is associated with high levels of fear and anxiety among parents and school staff. Because of this level of fear, many school districts, including the Canton Public School District, adopted no-nit policies in an attempt to prevent cases of head lice. It is time to make a change based on scientific evidence.

Problem

In the last decade, research findings and expert opinion have become increasingly critical of no-nit policies, for the following reasons:

- Head lice are not a health hazard or a sign of uncleanliness and are not responsible for the spread of any disease (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002).
- The presence of lice eggs, also called nits, does not indicate active infestation (Scott, Gilmer, Johannessen, 2004).
- Students are often inappropriately excluded from school due to misidentification of nits (eggs) or the presence of nits incapable of growing (Pollack, 2000).
- No data exists that demonstrates that no-nit policies are effective in reducing the transmission of lice (Pollack, 2000).
- A study of attendance records found 12 to 24 million school days are lost annually in the U.S. due to no-nit policies (Price, Burkhart, Burkhart, Burkhart, and Islam, 1999).

Rationale for Policy Change

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, “no healthy child should be excluded from or allowed to miss school time because of head lice (2002).” The official positions of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Harvard School of Public Health, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the National Association of School Nurses, and the Massachusetts School Nurses Organization all discourage no-nit policies.

Based on the facts that head lice are not known to cause any disease, that no-nit policies have not been shown to be effective in preventing the spread of lice, and that children miss valuable educational time every year due no-nit policies, it is recommended that the Canton Public School District change their official policy from “no nit” to “no live lice.” A new policy based on evidence and research will greatly benefit the children and schools in our community.

Citations

- American Academy of Family Physicians. (2003). *Practice Guidelines*. Retrieved December 11, 2007 from <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20030315/practice.html>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2002). Head lice. *Pediatrics*. 110(3). 638-643. Retrieved December 11, 2007 from <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/110/3/638>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2002). Head lice. *Pediatrics*. 107(5). 1011-1015. Retrieved December 11, 2007 from <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/107/5/1011>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Lice Infestation Pediculosis and Phthiriasis*. Retrieved December 11, 2007 from <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/lice/default.htm>
- Massachusetts Department of Public Health. (Revised 2007). *Massachusetts Comprehensive School Health Manual*. Chapter 8: Infectious Disease Control, p. 57-58.
- National Association of School Nurses. (2004). *Pediculosis in the school community*. Retrieved December 11, 2007 from <http://www.nasn.org/Default.aspx?tabid=237>
- Pollack, Richard J. (2000). *Head lice information*. Retrieved December 11, 2007 from <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html#children>
- Price, J., Burkhart, H., Burkhart, C., Burkhart, N., and Islam, C. (1999). School Nurses' Perceptions and Experiences with Head Lice. *Journal of School Health*. 69. 163-68.
- Scott, P., Gilner, M., and Johannessen, W. (2004). The Nit Rating Scale. *Journal of School Health*. 74(2). 108-110.