Rethinking Homework
Rethinking Homework

(For a more detailed look at the issues discussed here — including a comprehensive list of citations to relevant research and a discussion of successful efforts to effect change — please see the book The Homework Myth.)

After spending most of the day in school, children are typically given additional assignments to be completed at home. This is a rather curious fact when you stop to think about it, not as curious as the fact that few people ever stop to think about it.

It becomes even more curious, for that matter, in light of three other facts:

1. The negative effects of homework are well known.
2. Most homework is required to take place at home.
3. Most homework includes some component of learning that is not required to take place at home.

In most cases, students should be asked to do only what teachers are willing to create themselves, as opposed to prefabricated worksheets or generic exercises photocopied from textbooks. Also, it rarely makes sense to give the same assignment to all students in a class because it’s unlikely to be beneficial to most of them. When that’s not true, they should be free to spend their after-school hours as they choose. If homework is not the type of assignment that’s necessary for their current state of development, then it is not the type of assignment that should be included in the curriculum.

A homework assignment is an opportunity for you, as the student, to practice and improve the skills that you’re learning in class. But if you’re not given a choice about what you’re learning, or if you’re not asked to do something that you can do on your own, then it’s no longer homework. It’s just an assignment.

So what’s a thoughtful principal to do?

1. Educate yourself and share what you’ve learned with teachers, parents, and central office administrators.

2. Rethink standardized “homework policies.”

3. Restructured “homework policies.”

4. Change the default.

5. Ask the kids.

6. Suggest that teachers assign only what they design.

7. One homework as an opportunity to involve students in decision-making.

8. Help teachers move away from grading.

9. Experiment. Ask teachers who are reluctant to rethink their longstanding reliance on traditional homework to see how it works if, during a given week or curriculum unit, they tried assigning none.

Surely anyone who believes that homework should be included on the list of “opportunities to improve” by way of examination of the consequences of its absence. Are we the effects of a moratorium on a student’s achievement, on their interest in learning, on their needs and the resulting climate of the classroom? Likewise, the school as a whole can test out a new policy, such as the change in default that I’ve proposed, on a tentative basis before committing to it permanently.

Principal


