Rethinking Homework
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, but not as curious as the fact that few people ever stop to think about it.

1. **The negative effects of homework are well known.** Homework can include children’s extra-curricular activities, and possible loss of interest in learning. Many parents lament the impact of homework on their relationship with their children; they may also resent having to play the role of enforcer and worry that they will be criticized by the children’s teacher if they don’t assign enough homework. Some parents feel that their children need more practice, and are thus led to believe that more homework is not only inevitable but necessary. Descriptions abound in the popular media and in the opinions of parents and teachers alike about the supposed merits of homework. Yet, there is often little if any real assessment or consideration of why some parents are willing to assign extra homework — or for whom it is assigned.

2. **The positive effects of homework are largely mythical.** In preparation for a book on the topic, I’ve spent a lot of time sifting through the research. The results are nothing short of stunning. For starters, there is absolutely no evidence of any academic benefit from assigning homework in elementary or middle school. For younger students, in fact, there isn’t even a statistically significant correlation between the amount of homework and achievement. The evidence of positive effects tends to disappear when more sophisticated statistical measures are applied. Meanwhile, no study has ever substantiated the belief that homework builds character or teaches good study habits.

3. **Rethink standardized “homework policies.”** Requiring teachers to give a certain amount of homework every day, or to make assignments on the same schedule every week (for example, a minute of math on Saturdays and Mondays) is a frank admission that homework isn’t justified by a given lesson, much less is it a response to what specific kids need at a specific time. Such policies sacrifice thoughtful instruction in order to achieve predictability, and they tend to do a disservice not only to students but, when imposed from above, to teachers as well.

4. **Reduce the amount — but don’t stop.** The average student is undoubtedly overwhelmed by how much time their children have to spend on homework at a minimum. Make sure that teachers aren’t assigning more homework than their students can possibly understand. The assignment should be based on fact rather than folk wisdom. The results are nothing short of stunning. For starters, there is absolutely no evidence of any academic benefit from assigning homework in elementary or middle school. For younger students, in fact, there isn’t even a statistically significant correlation between the amount of homework and achievement. The evidence of positive effects tends to disappear when more sophisticated statistical measures are applied. Meanwhile, no study has ever substantiated the belief that homework builds character or teaches good study habits.

5. **Change the default.** Ultimately, it’s not enough just to have less homework or even better homework. We should change the fundamental expectation in our schools so that students are asked to take schoolwork home only when there’s a reasonable likelihood that it will be beneficial to most of them. When they aren’t, teachers should be free to spend their after-school hours choosing them. The bottom line is that homework should not only be free to some extent, but that the default should be on the side of service for those who need it.

6. **Suggest that teachers assign only what they design.** In most cases, students should be asked to do only what teachers are willing to create themselves, as opposed to pre-publicized worksheets or generic exercises photocopied from textbooks. Also, it rarely makes sense to give the same assignment to all students in a classroom because it’s unlikely to be beneficial for most of them. Those who already understand the concept will be wasting their time, and those who don’t understand will become increasingly frustrated. There is no perfect assignment that will stimulate every student because size simply doesn’t fit all. On those days when homework really seems necessary, teachers should create several assignments fitted to different ages or abilities. The default should be to simply avoid homework altogether.

7. **Use homework as an opportunity to involve students in decision-making.** One way to judge the quality of a classroom is by the extent to which students participate in making choices about their learning. The best teachers know that children learn how to make decisions by making decisions, not by following directions. Students should have something to say about what they’re going to learn and the circumstances under which they will learn it. For example, one of the best ways to avoid assigning homework is to have students share in the decision about what they want or need. The students can be asked to participate in the decision-making process not only to gather their support, but to help promote a sense of ownership and responsibility.

8. **Help teachers move away from grading.** Your faculty may need your support, encouragement, and practical suggestions to help them abandon a model in which assignments are checked off or graded. Students who understand the value of the homework are usually more responsible than those who do not. Teachers should be invited to reflect on whether any given assignment is designed to help students deepen their understanding of the subject matter. Teachers should be encouraged to consider the extent to which students are regarded as active partners in the learning process.

9. **Experiment.** Ask teachers who are reluctant to rethink their long-standing reliance on traditional homework to see what happens if, during a given week or curriculum unit, they tried assigning none. Surely anyone who believes that homework is beneficial would be willing to test that assumption by investigating the consequences of its absence. What are the effects of a moratorium on students’ achievement, on their interest in learning, on their needs and the resulting climate of the classroom? Likewise, the school as a whole can try out a new policy, such as the change in default that I’ve proposed, on a tentative basis before committing to it permanently.

In summary, the research on the subject is clear and compelling. It is simply a matter of choice as to what we wish to do. We have the tools that can help us to change our homework practices. And we have the opportunity to improve our students’ education.