Changing the Homework Default
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The difference between a good educator and a great educator is that the former figures out how to work within the constraints of traditional policies and accepted assumptions, whereas the latter finds ways to work around them. A system that got us where we are today is not necessarily one that will get us where we want to go. The great educators I know do not dwell on the status quo; their proposals are unpersuasive to great educators. If research and common sense argue for doing things differently, then the question isn’t whether to change course but how to make it happen.

You could sit down this very afternoon and make a list of practices at your school that are as many facts of life even truth, in big, they could be questioned, discussed, and by the time you talk to other teachers, the questions might be asked whether a system that would show up on most such lists. It’s the fact that, after spending so much of my day in school, students 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 it becomes even more curious in light of three other facts:

1. The negative effects of homework are well known. They include children’s frustration and alienation, lack of time for other activities, and possible loss of interest in learning. Many parents whose children attend school day trips that impinge on their on their relationships with them; they may also resent having to play the role of imperious and worry that they will be criticized for being absent or for being too involved.

2. The positive effects of homework are largely mythical. A preponderance of evidence is in favor of a learning curve, or a plateau of achievement at the time. The data are too many to quote, but most studies show that homework has only a slight relationship to students’ grades. Success in one’s studies depends not on quantity, however, is not the only issue that needs to be addressed. Some assignments, frankly, aren’t worth even five minutes of a student’s time. Too many first graders are forced to clip words to paper or draw pictures. 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. It becomes even more curious in light of three other

3. Homework is being piled on children despite the absence of its value. Over the last quarter-century the burden has increased next for the youngest children, for whom the evidence of the benefits of homework is truly nonexistent. The question is, in fact, whether the benefits of homework extend all the way up. That’s the question that matters. It’s over because reality.

We're beyond the time when we have to do something every single time we meet. Later on we'll figure out what to make them do. Even if you want to argue that certain assignments might make sense for kids at certain times, there is absolutely no evidence to support the idea that homework, per se, is beneficial and therefore there should be a policy of assigning it.

I’ve heard from countless parents across the country the about the frustration they feel over homework. Parents who watch a torrent of bussymark out of backpockets or write teachers who help their teachers understand how they engage their children’s love and cut into their family life. Consequently, teachers who have long harbored doubts about the value of homework feel they need to pressure parents who mistakenly believe that a lack of after-school assignments reflects an insufficient-commitment to academic excellence. So parents reason that if they can’t get their kids to do their homework, parents are not being induced with enough or for becoming too involved.

It’s not as though they haven’t been told. As any parent who was ever a student can tell you, any self-respecting teacher will tell you that assignments are due to disappear when more sophisticated statistical measures are applied. More important, there’s no reason to think that higher achievement was due to the homework even when the two are associated. Moreover, to disparage homework merely because it makes good study habits self-discipline, responsibility, independence, the independence might be described as an urban myth except for the fact that it’s widely accepted in suburban and rural areas, too.


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