

Changing the Homework Default

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By Alfie Kohn

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 figures out how to change whatever gets in the way of doing right by kids. "But we've always...", "But the parents will never...", "But we can't be the only school in the area to..." – all such protestations 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 treated as so many facts of life even though, in truth, they could be questioned, discussed, and ultimately changed or abandoned. (Come to think of it, doing just that might be a useful exercise for administrators, teachers, or students.) Lately I've been thinking about one prominent item that would show up on most such lists. It's the fact that, after spending most of the 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 the fact that few people ever stop to think about it. 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 exhaustion, lack of time for other activities, and possible loss of interest in learning. Many parents whose children attend day schools lament the impact of homework on their relationship with them; they may also resent having to play the role of enforcer and worry that they will be criticized either for not being involved enough with the homework or for becoming too involved.
- 2. The positive effects of homework are largely mythical.** In preparation for a book on this topic, I've spent a lot of time sifting through the relevant research. The results are nothing short of stunning. For starters, *there is absolutely no evidence of any academic benefit from assigning homework to children under the age of about fourteen.* For younger students, in fact, there isn't even a correlation between whether children do homework (or how much they do) and any meaningful measure of achievement. At the upper school level, there is a correlation, but it's weak and tends 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. Meanwhile, no study has ever substantiated the belief that homework builds character or teaches good study habits. The idea that after-school assignments promote self-discipline, responsibility, independence, and the like might be described as an urban myth except for the fact that it's widely accepted in suburban and rural areas, too.
- 3. More homework is being piled on children despite the absence of its value.** Over the last quarter-century the burden has increased most for the youngest children, for whom the evidence of positive effects isn't just dubious; it's nonexistent.

What's most remarkable about homework, I think, is the fact that it's assigned on a regular basis – which is to say, it's assigned irrespective of who the kids are, what they need, or what's being taught. It's not as though most teachers determine that a certain lesson really needs to continue after school is over because meaningful learning is so likely to result from such an assignment that it warrants the intrusion on family time. In other words, homework in most schools isn't limited to those occasions when it seems appropriate and important. Rather, the point of departure seems to be: "We've decided ahead of time that students will have to do something every night (or several times a week). Later on we'll figure out what to make them do." Even if you wanted to argue that certain assignments might make sense for certain kids at certain times, there is absolutely no evidence to support the idea that homework, per se, is beneficial and therefore that there should be a policy of assigning it all the time.

I've heard from countless people across the country about the frustration they feel over homework. Parents who watch a torrent of busywork spill out of backpacks wish they could help teachers understand how it erodes their children's love of learning and cuts into family time. Conversely, teachers who have long harbored doubts about the value of homework tell me they feel pressured by parents who mistakenly believe that a lack of after-school assignments reflects an insufficient commitment to academic excellence. Such parents seem to reason that as long as their kids have lots of stuff to do every night, never mind what it is, then learning *must* be taking place.

One reason I wrote my book was to provide supporting evidence for those willing to question the conventional wisdom about homework, be they heads of school, moms, third-grade teachers, or third-grade students. But evidence will only be considered by people who are willing to take a hard look at the slogans that pass for arguments – for example, that homework creates a link between school and family (as if there weren't more constructive ways to make that connection!), or that it "reinforces" what students were taught in class (a word that denotes the repetition of rote behaviors, not the development of understanding).

Above all, we need to remind ourselves and one another that the most important criterion for judging decisions about homework (or about other policies, for that matter) is the impact they're likely to have on students' attitudes about what they're doing. "Most of what homework is doing is driving kids away from learning," says education professor Harvey Daniels. Let's face it: Most children dread homework, or at best see it as something to be gotten through. In light of that understandable reaction, doing the homework is unlikely to provide academic benefits. After all, children are not vending machines such that we put in more homework and get out more learning. But even if it did improve their skills, that would have to be weighed against its likely effect on how they come to regard learning, their intrinsic motivation to read and think and explore ideas.

Here, then, is what I would suggest:

- 1. Educate yourself and share what you've learned with colleagues and parents.** Make sure you know what the research really says – that there is no reason to believe that children would be at any disadvantage in terms of their academic learning or life skills if they had much less homework, or even none at all.
- 2. Rethink standardized "homework policies."** Requiring teachers to give a certain number of minutes of homework every day, or to make assignments on the same schedule every week (for example, x minutes of math on Tuesdays and Thursdays) is a frank admission that the homework isn't a carefully considered response to what's going on with the curriculum at a specific time. Such policies sacrifice thoughtful, learner-centered instruction in the name of predictability, and they manage to do a disservice not only to students but, when imposed from above, to teachers, too.
- 3. Reduce the amount – but don't stop there.** Many parents are understandably upset with how much time their children have to spend on homework – to say nothing of how the kids themselves feel. At a minimum, make sure that you're not chronically underestimating how long it takes students to complete assignments. (As one mother told me, "It's cheating to say this is 20 minutes of homework if only your fastest kid can complete it in that time.") Then work on reducing the amount of homework irrespective of such guidelines and expectations so that families, not schools, decide how they will spend most of their evenings. After all, why should students be required to work what amounts to a second shift after a full day of academics? 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 from magazines that begin with a given letter of the alphabet. Too many fifth graders have to color in an endless list of factor pairs on graph paper. Too many eighth graders spend their evenings inching their way through dull, committee-written textbooks, one chapter at a time. The question that matters is whether any given example of homework will help students think deeply about questions that matter. What philosophy of teaching, what theory of learning, lies behind each assignment? Does it seem to assume that children are meaning makers – or empty vessels? Is learning regarded as a process that's mostly active or passive? Is it about wrestling with ideas or mindlessly following directions?
- 4. 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 a particular assignment will be beneficial to most of them. The bottom line: No homework except on those occasions when it's truly necessary.
- 5. Ask the kids.** Find out what students think of homework and solicit their suggestions – perhaps by distributing anonymous questionnaires. Many adults simply assume that homework is useful for promoting learning without even inquiring into the experience of the learners themselves! Do students find that homework really is useful? Why or why not? Are certain kinds better than others? How does homework affect their desire to learn? What are its other effects on their lives, and on their families?
- 6. Assign only what you design.** 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 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 one size simply doesn't fit all. On those days when homework really seems necessary, teachers should create several assignments fitted to different interests and capabilities. But it's better to give no homework to anyone than the same homework to everyone.
- 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 good 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'll learn it, as well as how (and when) their learning will be evaluated, how the room will be set up, how conflicts will be resolved, and a lot more. What is true of education in general is true of homework in particular. At least two investigators have found that the most impressive teachers (as defined by various criteria) tend to involve students in decisions about assignments rather than simply telling them what they'll have to do at home. A reasonable first question for a parent to ask upon seeing a homework assignment is "How much say did the kids have in determining how this had to be done, and on what schedule, and whether it really needed to be completed at home in the first place?" A discussion about whether homework might be useful (and why) can be valuable in its own right. If opinions are varied, the question of what to do when everyone doesn't agree – take a vote? keep talking until we reach consensus? look for a compromise? – can foster social skills as well as intellectual growth. And that growth occurs precisely because the teacher asked rather than told. Teachers who consult with their students on a regular basis would shake their heads vigorously were you to suggest that kids will always say no to homework – or to anything else that requires effort. It's just not true, they'll tell you. When students are treated with respect, when the assignments are worth doing, most kids relish a challenge. If, on the other hand, students groan about, or try to avoid, homework, it's generally because they get too much of it, or because it's assigned thoughtlessly and continuously, or simply because they had nothing to say about it. *The benefits of even high-quality assignments are limited if students feel "done to" instead of "worked with."*
- 8. Stop grading.** The goal should be to abandon a model in which assignments are checked off or graded, where the point is to enforce compliance, and move toward a model in which students explain and explore with one another what they've done – what they liked and disliked about the book they read, what they're struggling with, what new questions they came up with. As the eminent educator Martin Haberman observed, homework in the best classrooms "is not checked – it is shared." If students conclude that there's no point in spending time on assignments that aren't going to be collected or somehow recorded, that's not an argument for setting up bribes and threats and a climate of distrust; it's an indictment of the homework itself.
- 9. Experiment.** Even educators who are reluctant to rethink their long-standing reliance on traditional homework should be invited to see what happens if, during a given week or curriculum unit, they tried assigning none. Surely anyone who believes that homework is beneficial should 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 moods 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.

One of the most striking findings of my homework project was the testimony from people associated with schools across the country that give little or no traditional homework – and I don't mean only in the primary grades but all the way up. What I heard from the Kino School in Arizona, the Bellwether School in Vermont, the Wingra School in Wisconsin, the Golden Independent School in Colorado, and many others was not just that their students were managing to succeed academically despite the absence of homework, but that they were flourishing intellectually in large part *because* of the absence of homework. Many students take advantage of the freedom to choose their own activities after school by doing things that extend on, or are sparked by, what happened in class. "However," the academic administrator of the Kino School explained to me, "since these activities involve children's ideas and choices rather than being teacher-assigned, the children do not see them as homework, even if they spend hours on them."

Not all students will throw themselves into these activities. If we're serious about raising "well-rounded" kids, we would have to think twice about defining learning in narrowly academic terms – and filling up students' after-school hours with assignments skewed toward academics rather than those that promote their artistic, social, or physical development. And even if kids just goofed off at least some of the time, is that really so objectionable? We need time after work; why should children have to be productive until they drop off to sleep? Why shouldn't they be able to chill out, do whatever they enjoy after spending six or seven hours of school – and just be kids?

Your school may not yet be ready to change its default policy to one of no homework except when necessary. But the question is whether you and your colleagues are ready to begin a discussion – and to follow it wherever logic, evidence, and the best interests of your students may lead.

RESOURCES

- We are awash in articles and books that take the existence or value of homework for granted and merely offer suggestions for how it ought to be assigned, or what techniques should be used to make children complete it. Here are some resources that question the conventional assumptions about the subject in an effort to stimulate meaningful thinking and conversation.
- Barber, Bill. "Homework Does Not Belong on the Agenda for Educational Reform." *Educational Leadership*, May 1986: 55-57.
- Bennett, Sara, and Nancy Kalish. *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Crown, 2006).
- Buell, John. *Closing the Book on Homework: Enhancing Public Education and Freeing Family Time*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).
- Dudley-Marling, Curt. "How School Troubles Come Home: The Impact of Homework on Families of Struggling Learners." *Current Issues in Education* [On-line] 6, 4 (2003). Available at: <http://cie.edu.asu.edu/volume6/number4>.
- Hinchey, Patricia. "Rethinking Homework." *MASCD* [Missouri Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development] *Fall Journal*, December 1995: 13-17.
- Kohn, Alfie. *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006).
- Kralovec, Etta, and John Buell. *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008).
- Samway, Katharine. "'And You Run and You Run to Catch Up with the Sun, But It's Sinking.'" *Language Arts* 63 (1986): 352-57.
- Vatterott, Cathy. "There's Something Wrong With Homework." *Principal*, January-February 2003: 64. Available at: <http://www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentType=659>.
- Waldman, Ayelet. "Homework Hell." *Salon.com*. October 22, 2005. Available at: www.salon.com/mnt/col/waldman/2005/10/22/homework/print.html.

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