Rethinking Homework
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(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, but 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. Homework, by and large, includes children's activities, and possibly 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 warn that they will be criticized for not following through. For some parents, homework is a way of making children responsible and for kids not being involved in school. For many others, homework is simply a way of managing the workload of school.

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 to elementary or middle school. For younger students, in fact, there isn't even a correlation between how much they do and their level of achievement; much of what parents think they're doing is just an illusion.

3. Homework in most schools isn't limited to those occasions when it seems appropriate and important. The benefits of even high-quality assignments are limited if students feel "done to" instead of "worked with." Don't we want our students to participate in their own education? Homework is, after all, a time when students must be willing to work at home. It becomes even more curious, for that matter, in light of three other facts: (1) The negative effects of homework are well known. (2) The positive effects of homework are largely mythical. (3) Homework in most schools isn't limited to those occasions when it seems appropriate and important.

In most cases, students should be asked to do only what teachers are willing to create themselves, as opposed to prepackaged 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 everybody. What's the quality of a classroom is by the extent to which students participate in making choices about their learning. The best teachers know how 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 the learning will be evaluated, how the work will be set up, how conflicts will be resolved, and a lot more.

At least 50 studies have found that the most impressive teachers (as defined by various criteria) tend to involve students in decisions about assignments. Teachers who make assignments relevant to specific time. Such policies sacrifice thoughtful instruction in order to achieve predictability, and they manage to do a disservice not only to students but, when imposed from above, to teachers as well. So what's a thoughtful principal to do? 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 how 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 the learning will be evaluated, how the work will be set up, how conflicts will be resolved, and a lot more.

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