Rethinking Homework
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For a more detailed look at the issues discussed here — including a wide range of critical perspectives on homework and detailed case studies of successful homework reduction efforts — 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.

The negative effects of homework are well known. It can take up a lot of time, it can be stressful, it can include children's irritations, and it can become a point of contention between parents and teachers. 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 teachers for not being involved enough. Some parents feel that being involved enough is to let their children do homework, without homework. But of course a principal's ultimate obligation is to do what's right by the children, to protect them from harmful mandates and practices that would otherwise be imposed on them.

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's even evidence that too much homework can have the opposite effect on their educational achievement. More students are likely to lose interest in school, the quantity of homework they do is likely to decrease, and evidence on its impact on students' academic performance tends to disappear as the information is over-stated and available at the level of their children.

3. Homework should be based on fact rather than folklore. There is not a shred of evidence that homework is effective 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 of homework more likely to have on students' attitudes? 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 assign less homework than those defined as average. Teachers who have long harbored doubts about the value of homework feel pressured by those parents who mistakenly believe that a lack of after-school assignments reflects an insufficient commitment to academic achievement. 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.

What parents and teachers need is support from administrators who are willing to challenge the conventional wisdom. They need principals who question the slogans that pass for arguments: that homework is good for character building and instills self-discipline, or that it teaches children self-discipline and responsibility (a claim for which absolutely no evidence exists).

Above all, principals need to help their faculties see that the most important criterion for judging decisions about homework (or 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 preparation for a tentative basis before committing to it permanently.

5. Ask the kids. Find out what students think of homework and solicit their suggestions — perhaps by distributing anonymous surveys. Many adults simplify 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 of homework more likely to have an impact on students? 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 assign less homework than those defined as average. Teachers who have long harbored doubts about the value of homework feel pressured by those parents who mistakenly believe that a lack of after-school assignments reflects an insufficient commitment to academic achievement. 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.

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 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. When that is not true, they should be free to spend their after-school hours as they choose. The bottom line is that homework is not an issue on those occasions when it's truly necessary. This, of course, is a reversal of the current default state, which amounts to an endorsement of homework for its own sake, regardless of the content, a view that simply can't be justified.

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 will be learning it will be evaluated, how the room will be set up, how assignments will be grades and so on.

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 given a grade. In most cases, 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. Ask teachers who are reluctant to rethink their long-standing 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 is beneficial is wise to welcome an opportunity 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.

Principal
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