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 documented. Homework can, at times, include children’s 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 if their child isn’t doing homework. Principals might find it helpful to keep in mind that for many of their students, the thought of homework is a legitimate basis for fear and anxiety.

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 correlation between the amount of homework they do if they do it outside of school and their levels of achievement, the overworked principal’s ultimate obligation is to do what’s right by the children, to protect them from harmful mandates and practices that persist not because they’re valuable but merely because they’re traditional.

3. More homework doesn’t usually mean better results. As the 20th century’s burden of overwork on its children might lead us to believe, evidence of positive effects isn’t just dubious; it’s nonexistent.

It’s not as though most teachers decide now and then that students should be given homework on something that’s overdone, on something different, on something meaningful. Learning is so likely to result from such an assignment that it warrants the intrusions on family time. 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 children will have to do something every night (or several times a week). Later on we’ll figure out what to make them do.” I’ve heard from countless people across the country who say that parents who watch a television program early in the evening are likely to wake up out of their children’s backpacks with questions about how the cons outweigh the pros. And 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 necessary for success in life, that homework affects their children’s 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 as quickly as possible. If it did provide other benefits, they would have to be weighed against its likely effect on kids’ love of learning.

So what’s a thoughtful principal to do?

1. Educate yourself and share what you’ve learned with teachers, parents, and central office administrators. Make sure you know what the research really says – that there is no reason to believe that assigning homework to any elementary school student is likely to result, even of their academic performance. Such assignments should be based on fact, rather than folk wisdom.

2. 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 minimum of math on Tuesday and Thursday) 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 manage to do a disservice not only to students but, when imposed from above, to teachers as well.

3. Reduce the amount – but don’t stop. Many parents are understandably upset with how much time their children have to spend on homework. At a minimum, make sure that teachers aren’t exceeding the guidelines issued by the district. There is no way to objectively understand that a given assignment is beneficial to most of them. When that isn’t true, they should be free to spend their after-school hours choosing as they please. The homework except on those occasions when it’s truly necessary. Of course, there 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. A common objection to this is that some students have “learning styles.” While the phrase is inexact, it’s easy to see how the argument could be extended to include students who need to think about problems in a particular way, or those who need extra time to process information. The argument that homework is good because it is fun, or that it provides an opportunity for students to take learning beyond the classroom, is a bit silly. If it’s true, they’ll tell you. When students are treated with respect, when the assignments are worth doing, most kids relish a challenge.

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 their homework home, when there is a reasonable likelihood that it will be beneficial to most of them. When that isn’t true, they should be free to spend their after-school hours choosing as they please. The homework except on those occasions when it’s truly necessary. Of course, there 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. A common objection to this is that some students have “learning styles.” While the phrase is inexact, it’s easy to see how the argument could be extended to include students who need to think about problems in a particular way, or those who need extra time to process information. The argument that homework is good because it is fun, or that it provides an opportunity for students to take learning beyond the classroom, is a bit silly. If it’s true, they’ll tell you. When students are treated with respect, when the assignments are worth doing, most kids relish a challenge.

5. Ask the kids. Find out what students think of homework and solicit their suggestions – perhaps by distributing anonymous surveys. 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 of students more likely to benefit than others? Does homework affect their desire to learn? When are other effects their desire to learn? When are the negative effects the same? Do these negative effects differ among students, or are all students affected in the same way?

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. 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 of a class 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, and make sure that the 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?”

7. One 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 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 they will be learning, and the results of the decision will be up to the students. Conflicts will be resolved, and a lot more.

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. Few teachers explain to students and explore with one another what they’re doing – 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 indication of the homework itself.

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

Hinchey, Patricia. "Rethinking Homework." The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning

Principals deal with an endless series of crises; they’re called upon to resolve complaints, soothe wounded egos, negotiate solutions, try to keep everyone happy, and generally make the


Vetter, Catherine. "Homework: There’s Something Wrong with It." Principal's Journal, January/February 2003: 64.