Rethinking Homework
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(principle article about the issues discussed here – including a review of 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. Many parents say that homework is a waste of time, and that it detracts from their children's health and well-being. They may even say that homework is a bad idea, because it takes away from their children's ability to learn. But few parents have actually made the case for why homework is a bad idea. Many have simply assumed that homework is bad, because they believe that it is bad for their children.

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 any evidence that they learn anything from homework. Yet, in spite of this, we continue to assign homework to children. Why? Because we believe that homework is a good thing.

3. Homework is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Many students are understanding upset with how much time their children have to spend on homework. At a minimum, make sure that teachers aren't assigning too much homework. And, if you have doubts about the value of homework, have your students do the assignments themselves. You can then decide for yourself whether homework is worth the effort.

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 homework causes any harm, and that it may actually be beneficial for some students.

2. Rethink traditional “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, a minute of math on Sunday and a minute of English on Monday) 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.

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. At a minimum, make sure that teachers aren’t assigning too much homework. And, if you have doubts about the value of homework, have your students do the assignments themselves. You can then decide for yourself whether homework is worth the effort.

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 on an issue like homework, for that is a reasonable reflection of how beneficial that is to most of them. When that isn’t true, they should be free to spend their after-school hours as they choose. This is not to say that homework is unnecessary on those occasions when it truly is 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.

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 homework more useful or less so than other kinds? In other words, what do they want to do on their own, and what do they want to do on their own?

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 because one size simply doesn’t fit all. On those days when homework really seems necessary, teachers should create several assignments fitted to different abilities in the classroom, and homework that is tailored to them.

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 how to teach students 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 their learning will be evaluated, how the room will be set up, how much time will be spent on assignments, 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 graded, where the point is to enforce compliance, and toward a model in which students explain and explore with one another what they’ve done – what they liked and disliked about the assignment, 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?

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 will be willing to do this as an exception by investigating the consequences of its absence. What are the effects of a moratorium on students’ achievement, 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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