



# Just for the ASKing!

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*Just for the ASKing!* is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. The focus this month is on the debate surrounding the practice of homework and recommendations on how to use homework to increase student learning.

## The Homework Dilemma



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

One topic that seems to always elicit opinions, touch a nerve, or stir emotions among educators is homework. Some educators feel strongly that homework is a vital and necessary adjunct to classroom instruction. Others firmly believe that the standards movement identifies so much content to be addressed and that face-to-face time in the classroom is limited, so homework is a necessary requirement if students are to learn all the necessary material. Still others take the approach that what is most important is what takes place in the classroom, and because of the unequal access to resources and variations in support at home to complete assignments, homework should be kept to a minimum. Regardless of one's beliefs about homework, there is one firm "truth" on the topic: **Homework is a much debated practice.**

As the discussion around the topic of homework unfolds, many questions inevitably become part of the discussion:

- What is the best type of homework to assign?
- How much time should students devote to homework?
- Should homework be graded, i.e., should it "count" as part of a student's grade?
- How can we use homework as formative assessment data?
- What do you do with students who do not do their homework, why don't they do it, and how do you get them to do it?
- How does homework impact overall student achievement?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of assigning homework?

Attempting to synopsize the information on such an important topic as homework is difficult at best. Below you will find my best effort to pull much of the data together to help teachers determine how to deal with this controversial topic.

The debate surrounding homework is not a new phenomenon, and, in fact, it has gone through cycles throughout the last century. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the pervasive attitude was that homework built disciplined minds. In the 1940's, a popular belief was that homework interfered with other activities and may have an impact on children's health. The tide changed in the 1950's when the launch of Sputnik by

the Soviets sparked international competition and thus a resurgence in the importance of homework. During the next decade, parents often pushed for more homework. By the end of the 1960's, however, homework was viewed by many as "excessive" and a practice which put too much pressure on children. With the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 came an increased support for more homework as a means of building stronger character and improving academic growth. Today the debate goes on. While the majority of parents and educators support homework, anti-homework books have been published which question its benefits on overall student achievement. Alfie Kohn, author of *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing*, describes how research on the benefit of homework has been misunderstood and misused. He argues that researchers have used a "selective reliance" on homework data to reach "phantom findings." He further worries about over-worked children "missing out on their childhood." From a different perspective, a 2007 survey by the Met Life Insurance Company concluded that 80% of teachers and parents and 70% of students saw homework as important or very important in learning and overall achievement.

The research on the value of homework is unclear with many ambiguities and conflicting results. There is no conclusive evidence that homework increases student achievement for all students. Some of the many recommendations found in the literature include:

- Homework has more benefits for older students than younger students.
- Students from lower income families may not benefit from homework because of inequities in the environment in which homework is done. Critics of homework point out that homework may actually widen the achievement gap since economically-disadvantaged students have less parental support and supervision, limited quieter places to do homework, and a paucity of resources including computers and access to the Internet.
- Too much homework may have a negative impact on its effectiveness. Some research findings have shown that high school students should spend between 1 ½ to 2 ½ hours on homework while middle schoolers should devote approximately one hour per night to homework.
- For younger children, the benefits of homework appear to come from non-academic areas including developing good study habits, time management, and the importance of learning personal responsibility.
- Some educators recommend that the best homework practice for young students is to have them read or be read to by parents.
- Another rule of thumb is that students should not be expected to devote more than the grade level of the student multiplied by ten (to coincide with a number of minutes). For example, a fifth grader would spend no more than 50 minutes on homework.

With all the ambiguities surrounding the topic of homework, it is difficult for teachers to know exactly what practices to follow. A logical place to begin in the discussion of homework is to examine the purposes for which homework is assigned and/or completed. In 1979, Lee and Pruitt identified four categories of homework:

- **Practice** homework is the most common type and is used to reinforce content presented in class to help students master skills.
- **Preparation** homework is assigned to introduce students to content that will be addressed in class in the future.
- **Extension** homework asks students to use the knowledge and skills they have already learned in new and relevant contexts or situations.
- **Creative** homework requires students to integrate multiple concepts and use critical thinking and problem-solving skills as they develop products and performances that represent their learning.

Practice and preparation homework often consists of worksheets, problems or exercises from a textbook, or a reading assignment. These types of assignments are not necessarily interesting or intriguing, and, as a result, may not be completed with special care or dedication. Paula Rutherford points out in her book,

***Instruction for All Students***, that “Common sense and our own experiences as learners tell us that extension and creative homework assignments are much more likely to engage students in the learning and minimize the ever-present problem of incomplete or copied homework.” She adds that reading assignments given to prepare students for upcoming discussions are not productive unless a clear purpose for reading is established and students’ prior knowledge is accessed. To support the design of homework in all four categories, see pages 141 – 148 in ***Instruction for All Students*** and use the attached **Homework Planning Guide**.

Robert Marzano and Debra Pickering have concluded that there is an abundance of research to back up the right kind of homework. They emphasize that teachers must assign homework that produces “learning gains.” They recommend the following practices:

Assign purposeful, well-thought out homework that will enable students to practice a skill or process that students can do independently. As they point out, “...inappropriate homework is a waste of everyone’s time” and can have a detrimental effect on student learning since students may be practicing “mistakes” when they are ill-prepared to complete the assignment;

Make sure to assign homework that is likely to be completed by making the assignment high interest and at the appropriate level of difficulty;

Parents should not act as homework police but should instead serve as sounding boards to help students summarize what they have learned from the homework assignment.

Stanford University professors Linda Darling-Hammond and Olivia Hill-Lynch have written about successful homework strategies. Strategies they recommend include:

- Assign work that is worthy of the effort students are expected to put forth. A series of 50 math problems or the completion of a reading assignment with little or no background knowledge is likely to be avoided by students. On the other hand, an assignment with real life applications or one which students should be able to complete without a sense of frustration or boredom is much more worthwhile.
- Make sure the directions for the homework are perfectly clear and that the assigned work is doable. A good practice is to have students verbalize their understanding of the directions with a partner to avoid going home and facing confusion.
- Teachers should talk to their colleagues about homework assignments that have the highest return rate. Again and again the answer to troubling issues in teaching is right next door or right across the hall.
- Pay special attention to students who are not completing homework or are struggling to finish work successfully. Teachers should reach out to these individuals to discover possible approaches that will work for them. Relationship building as opposed to ignoring students may increase the rate of homework completion and decrease the need for remediation.

As I interact with educators and review the literature, I conclude that the research and personal practice experiences indicate that while homework can be a valuable support for learning, it is not a strategy that works in all situations and for all children. I recommend the following:

- If the current homework policy is not resulting in increased student learning, or if it is resulting in a battle of will between the teacher and certain students, it is time to re-examine homework policies and practices.
- Since too much homework may negatively impact its effectiveness, teachers should assign homework judiciously, deliberately, and moderately. The purpose of homework is not to create excessive demands on student time but to build on student skills and knowledge.
- The quality of homework assignments is more important than the quantity of work a student is to complete or the amount of time a student must put in to complete the work at home.
- Homework should be designed at the independent level; it should reinforce or extend concepts, content, and processes that have been studied in class under the guidance of the teacher. Parental assistance should not be an expected or required component for successful completion of homework.
- Homework results should be used as formative assessment data and influence instructional decisions.

- Students should receive feedback from the teacher or classmates and have the opportunity to respond to that feedback.
- Since homework is a formative part of the learning process, it should not be graded. As New York teacher Lisa Mangione puts it, homework is like the practices athletes do before games, but are not averaged into the score of the game. Homework and athletic practices are important but we have to be clear about the purpose of each.

As educators struggle with the homework dilemma, individual teachers, entire schools, or school districts should constantly examine their homework policies to determine what direction to take. At the core of the discussion should be the reminder that the purpose of homework should be to increase student learning. If educators do not see a direct link to increased engagement in learning and improved student achievement, it is time to re-think the homework philosophy and practices.

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# Homework Planning Guide

As you plan a unit of study, use the homework categories below to thoughtfully design homework that will help your students move toward mastery of the standards on which the unit is based and will also give you good formative assessment data.

 **Practice**

 **Preparation**

 **Extension**

 **Creative**

What language could you use to communicate the homework assignments in a way that students know what to do, know why they are doing it, and know when they are successful?