



Homework: A Historic Look Into the 21st Century

Homework Defined

If every school district submitted a definition for homework, what differences would be found? The Education World's Administrator's Center (Education World, 2008) posed this question in 2005 and found numerous definitions. *What is homework?*

-Prepares for, builds on, or reinforces classroom learning.

-Encourages student responsibility and accountability.

-Helps develop study and time management skills.

-Strengthens home-to-school communication.

-Needs to acknowledge student differences.

-Must be completed with in-home resources.

-Shouldn't be time-consuming for the parent.

-Part of the school's developmental curriculum.

-The responsibility of the student, not the parent.

Homework has been a mainstay in American schools but "has become a source of restrained debate among educators and parents" (ASCD, 2008). While the benefits are endless, the complaints are as well. Educators have noted that students' lives are busy outside of the school day with little evening time and that some home environments are not conducive for homework (ASCD, 2008). The strongest argument came from the "one-size-fits-all" nature of home-



"Homework is typically defined as assigned tasks by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours." (Marzano, 2008)

work, not specifically meeting every student's individual need.

The pros and cons of homework are determining factors when defining homework. More importantly, determining what homework is and should be is a critical first step when creating a school homework policy (Education World, 2008).

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Special points of interest:

- ♦ *How valuable is homework?*
- ♦ *Why has homework received negative attention?*
- ♦ *What is the purpose of homework?*
- ♦ *How much homework should students have?*
- ♦ *How do we analyze homework and shapeshift policies?*

Is Homework Valuable?

C. Robert Henrikson, President and Chief Executive Officer of MetLife, Inc., reported a survey conducted for MetLife in 2007. Youth and Education researcher, Dana Markow, Ph.D., lead the study for the purpose of "sharing the voices and perspectives of those closest to the issues" (MetLife, 2008).

The percentages below

believe homework holds value and is important or very important.

- 83% of teachers
- 81% of parents
- 77% of students

When key stakeholders were asked if homework helps what is learned in school, a majority agreed.

- 91% of teachers
- 89% of parents
- 69% of students

Over one-quarter of students believe "their homework is not relevant to their current schoolwork or their future goals," tying back to the significance of making homework purposeful (MetLife, 2008).

Homework's Negative Attention

Researchers Etta Kralovec and John Buell presented a compelling case against homework assignments in 2000 with their book, *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning*. "The authors focused particularly on the harm to economically disadvantaged students, who are unintentionally penalized because their environments often make it al-



"Although the research support for homework is compelling, the case against homework is popular." (Marzano, 2008)

most impossible to complete assignments at home" (Marzano, 2008).

Authors Sara Bennett and Nancy Kalish followed with *The Case Against Homework* in 2006, criticizing "both the quantity and quality of homework" (Marzano, 2008). In 2006, author Alfie Kohn also published *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing*, where he

"concluded that research fails to demonstrate homework's effectiveness as an instructional tool" and that "teachers should only assign homework when they can justify that the assignments are 'beneficial'" (Marzano, 2008).

While researchers on both ends agree that homework should indeed have a purpose, there is disagreement on what research suggests. Robert Marzano, Debra Pickering and Jane Pollock argue that decades of research support homework's effectiveness.

Homework's Purpose

When education consultant, Bea McGarvey guides educators through the tough homework debate, she advises teachers to "be clear about the knowledge you want students to get from the homework" (ASCD, 2008). Before giving an assignment, it's crucial to know "why" the assignment is being given.

-Am I preparing my students for new learning?

-Am I checking for student understanding?

"Homework must have a purpose - and teachers should share that purpose with their students." (ASCD, 2008)

-Am I asking students to practice a skill or process?

If students are asked to prepare for future learning, make this clear to students so they understand the

assignment is one of preparation. Student understanding can take many forms, such as asking students to create graphs or charts to summarize what has been learned in class. McGarvey urges educators to take an active and swift role in the homework process. "Students need prompt feedback on whether they are using the skill or process correctly" because "practice makes permanent" (ASCD, 2008).

Homework in a Nutshell

Researchers have proven that homework can be effective and ineffective but both sides agree that "schools should strengthen their policies to ensure that teachers use homework properly" when assigned (Marzano, 2008). The following guidelines are recommended:

- Make sure homework serves an intended purpose (future learning, practicing a skill, etc.).

- Assignments should be challenging but not at an inappropriate level of difficulty.

- Parents should be provided with a homework policy and their role in homework completion should be minimal.



"Teachers must communicate expectations to students and family members." (ASCD, 2008)

- Monitor homework given and provide timely and helpful feedback.

"Teachers who give their assignments thoughtful consideration understand they have a responsibility to ensure that homework does, indeed, work" (ASCD, 2008).

How Much is Too Much?

The question of how much homework to assign seems to be an easier question to answer according to surveys by Education World. “We were surprised to find quite a bit of consistency across schools and districts when it comes to “How much homework should students have?” (Education World, 2008).

Most educators agree that 10 to 15 minutes of



“Objectivity about homework can be difficult, particularly if the assignment is a teacher’s personal favorite.” (ASCD, 2008)

homework is appropriate for each grade level of advancement. For example, a first grader would have 10 minutes but a third grader would have 30. One school district parallels homework with success. “Successful students make connections between what is taught in school and what is experienced outside the classroom” (Education World, 2008).

Bea McGarvey, an edu-

cation consultant with 25 years of experience in education, encourages educators to “review the return.” “Thinking about purpose can help teachers identify those assignments that, at first glance, seem to be suitable but don’t stand up under further scrutiny” (ASCD, 2008). Purposeful, time-appropriate homework assignments offset the complaints by “ensuring that students reap the benefits of homework” (ASCD, 2008).

Homework, Research & Reward

In 2006, researchers Harris Cooper, Jorgianne Robinson and Erica Patall analyzed research statistics between 1987 and 2003 that compared students who were given homework to those who were not. “Across five studies, the average (fiftieth-percentile) homework doer had a higher unit test score than 73 percent of students not doing homework” (NCTM, 2008). Robert Marzano and Debra Pickering argue that research does prove enhanced achievement “by extending learning

beyond the classroom” (Marzano, 2008). For many Americans, the academic achievement of American children compared to that of other countries is closely tied to performance. In 1994, the National Education Commission on Time and Learning stated that American public schools expect students “to learn as much as their counterparts abroad in only half the time” (ed.gov, 2008).

If homework is not given, “a school or district would be obliged to iden-

“Homework has been a perennial topic of debate in education, and attitudes toward it have been cyclical.” (Marzano, 2008)

tify a practice that produces a similar effect within the confines of the school day without taking away or diminishing the benefits of other academic activities” (Marzano, 2008).

Shapeshifting Our Ideas

Educator Brenda Dyck remembers when she and fellow colleagues were asked to rethink their homework policies. “I clearly remember the negative body language” (NEA, 2008). Over the next two months, reform was enlightening but painful as teachers analyzed homework approaches. “Reflecting on the homework we assigned helped us see that our assignments were sometimes unclear or complicated” (NEA,

2008). Shapeshifting may not be easy, but is necessary according to the 2007 MetLife survey, *The Homework Experience*. “Many teachers do not communicate with other teachers about homework quantity” (MetLife, 2008). Although shapeshifting is messy at times, Dyck

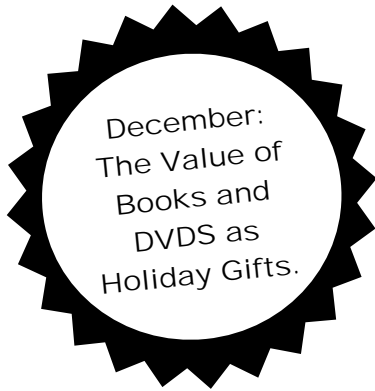


“If homework is given, it must be graded for completeness and accuracy.” (Education World, 2008)

feels it’s “well worth the effort” (NEA, 2008). “What my colleagues and I learned didn’t have as much to do with homework as it did with discovering how to implement meaningful change by reshaping the learning environment” (NEA, 2008).

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Daphne Morris, M.Ed., met Trevor Romain in 1992 when he visited a school as a guest speaker. Impressed by Trevor's profound and meaningful impact on students, Daphne joined The Trevor Romain Company in 2006. A former elementary school principal, Daphne holds two Master's degrees in education.

November Q&A

Q: Have we, as educators, been effective within the last decade as we try to build school-to-parent relationships?



Single-parent families, long hours at work, and extra curricular activities are just some of the challenges our communities face today. Analyzing our message to parents in these sometimes unsupportive environments is crucial. In the article, *Shapeshifting Our Ideas*, Dyck and her colleagues discovered that many homework assignments were difficult to understand, generating a negative reaction on the part of parents as they tried to facilitate their children's studies. This is why educators must consistently know their "customer" so they "began to restructure the methods used to articulate assignment expectations" (NEA; 2008). It may feel like an up-hill battle at times, but according to the MetLife 2007 homework survey, school-parent relations have improved since 1987 (MetLife; 2008).

Resources:

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