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Homework!

Strategies to overcome the struggles and help all students

By Chip Wood

Ask any teacher, parent, student, or administrator about homework and you're likely to get a different opinion about the quality and quantity at their school: there should be more, there should be less, it's too easy, it's too hard, it should start when children are very young, it should start when children are older.

While many schools have policies which clearly spell out homework expectations and sound simple enough—all students will have one hour of homework every night—every teacher knows that the reality of assigning and monitoring homework every day for a group of 20–30 students is anything but simple.

When the subject of homework arose in a recent workshop for K–8 teachers, the questions and concerns flooded out:

“What about the children who never do their homework? I've tried just about everything and nothing helps.”

“What about the students who only do part of the assignment?”

“What about the kids who don't do it because there's no one around at home to help them?”

If you're like most teachers, you've probably experienced all of these problems and more. Is it possible to make them all disappear? Unlikely. But it is possible to greatly reduce the number of problems and to increase the chances that all students will experience success. In this article I offer a few key strategies which have proven successful.

Take the time to teach homework

The typical approach to introducing homework is to talk with students about homework expectations. We tell them how they are to do their homework; we may even talk about good homework habits. We then send them off to do it alone, and more often than not, we're disappointed with the results.

The critical step that's missing here is practice. If we really want students to understand our expectations for homework and successfully meet these expectations, then we must be willing to “teach” homework. This means introducing homework slowly and incrementally and providing plenty of time for students to practice the routine under our guidance before expecting them to do it at home independently.

At the K.T. Murphy School in Stamford, Connecticut, for example, during the first six weeks of school, primary grade students complete all written homework in class. Older students do the same for the first two to four weeks. During this practice period, teachers and students work to define expectations for high-quality homework and students bring home their completed “homework” to share with parents. In this way, parents gain a better understanding of homework expectations and are better able to hold their children to these expectations.

It's never too late to begin

A proactive approach to homework early in the school year has helped many teachers keep students on track academically and away from the negative lessons of detention or missed recess. But no matter what time of the year it is, if your students are struggling with homework, you might want to spend a week or two re-introducing it to your class.

As nearly every page of the newly released book *The First Six Weeks of School* reminds us, taking the time to slowly

introduce classroom procedures, curriculum, and materials is vital to students' success. The same holds true for homework, and the strategies used during the first six weeks of school can be applied to any time of the school year.

Be flexible and individualize as needed

It's often the case that all students are given identical homework assignments. This practice guarantees failure for some students. Discouraged by their inability to meet expectations, many students invent ingenious excuses each morning for their failure. Their willingness to invest energy creating excuses, however, is a sign of their continued eagerness to do what is expected of them. Other students, more defeated, simply respond to the question of "Where's your homework?" with "I don't know."

If we are to increase students' success with homework, we must be willing to be flexible and to individualize assignments. As Melvin Konner, author of *Childhood: A Multi-cultural View*, states, "In order to be treated fairly and equally, children have to be treated differently." Yes, differentiated homework, like differentiated instruction, will be more work for the teacher in the short run, but the long-term pay-off of student success and investment will be worth it.

I suggest that teachers apply the same "3R's" they use for choosing logical consequences—consequences should be respectful, related, and reasonable—to choosing homework. That is, homework should be:

- respectful of the child's ability and developmental level,
- related to the work of the classroom and, where possible, to the interest of the individual student, and
- reasonable in amount and degree of difficulty.

This does not mean that teachers need to create different homework assignments for every student every day, of course. There are obviously some assignments that everyone has to do and can easily accomplish, like writing in a journal or practicing spelling words. This work, like project homework in which students have had some choice in the assignment, is differentiated by default because students will choose how much they do in these situations.

Specific differentiation is needed, however, for those students whose ability or work ethic is in need of support. There may be a student, for example, who struggles with math. For this child, completing the standard homework assignment of 20 math problems could mean two hours of grueling work as opposed to the 20 minutes it takes for most. Anticipating this, the teacher might adjust the length of the assignment accordingly.

Other modifications might include arranging for a child to get help with a homework assignment from a parent or sibling or modifying the way in which an assignment is done (for example, dictating rather than writing, or having a parent read a chapter from a textbook to a child rather than the child reading it him/herself).

The important question to ask is, "How might I modify this assignment to fit this child's learning style and needs?" By having students complete homework assignments in school during the early weeks of school, teachers can learn a lot about students' varying abilities to work independently, information which can be used to adjust expectations accordingly.

Involve parents

The most important strategy for involving parents is to inform them of your homework practices. Clearly, the more informed parents are about homework expectations, the better able they'll be to help their children meet these expectations. Many teachers and schools send a letter to parents at the beginning of the school year explaining the homework policy and expectations and enlisting parent support. At K.T. Murphy School, this letter arrives with a packet of information, in several languages, offering guidelines for setting up a space and time for homework and a checklist for homework expectations.

A great early-in-the-year class project could be to write your own "Homework Manual" as a class, perhaps with a "homework hint" from each student, and send the manual home to parents. As mentioned earlier, having students complete their first homework assignments at school and bringing them home to share with their family will also help parents gain a clear understanding of homework expectations.

...and if students still forget or don't finish their homework?

And, of course, this will happen. One approach is to use logical consequences. A student who has been given reasonable, respectful, and related homework and who still has occasional creative excuses needs to experience equally creative consequences that send the message that completing homework is a requirement of being a member of the class.

Perhaps homework is the students' ticket into homeroom. No hanging out with friends or participating in Morning Meeting until homework is completed. If a child does not have his/her homework, s/he goes directly to a buddy teacher's classroom to complete it. Or, perhaps a child has a choice of where to complete the homework, in the classroom within earshot of the activities of the class or in the library or guidance counselor's office.

These consequences are liable to work for the usually conscientious student. For the more frequent offender, a more careful proactive approach is warranted. I call this approach "incremental success" and favor it over daily failure. Here's how it works:

Marie has not successfully completed a homework assignment for several weeks. I have a conference with her to ascertain what the problem is and to let her know I'm willing to work jointly on this. Then I ask her what a reasonable number of, say, math problems is for tonight's assignment. If she says "none," I say, "That's not an option." If she says "three," I say, "Great! Bring in three beautifully done problems tomorrow."

When Marie brings in the completed homework, I present her with a "learning log" or record sheet which I have prepared for her to keep track of her own progress. In it she records her successes and failures, her ups and downs, as we proceed through math homework for a month or two. I check in frequently with her during this time, and periodically we review her progress and adjust assignments accordingly.

At the end of a two-month period, with more success than failure now a daily occurrence, we decide together when to eliminate the log. I have used this approach successfully with first graders and sixth graders and am always delighted in the increased responsibility and sense of pride shown by the students. Of course, there are ups and downs to this process for the teacher, too, but in the end, this proactive effort often yields dramatic results.

We ask a lot from children when we ask them to do homework—we ask them to follow directions, to organize their materials, to manage their time, and to work independently. It's a tall order and its value lies in students experiencing success. Only then will homework be effective in improving students' sense of responsibility and accomplishment, their academic skills, and their independent study habits.

Further Reading

Online

“Homework Lessons: Help kids overcome obstacles and learn to complete homework successfully.” This article by Ruth Sidney Charney first appeared in the January 1999 issue of Creative Classroom.

www.responsiveclassroom.org/feature_16.htm

“Help! Homework Is Wrecking My Home Life!” This August 2000 article takes a look at current research on homework and explores the question, “How much homework is too much?”

www.education-world.com/a_admin/admin182.shtml

“Homework Bound.” This January 3, 1999, New York Times article summarizes the current research on homework, including the work of Harris Cooper and Carol Huntsinger.

www.nytimes.com/library/national/010399-edlife-homework.html

“Homework: Time To Turn It In?” This April 1999 NEA Today article describes Harris Cooper’s research and includes his suggestions for making homework work.

www.nea.org/nea_today/9904/scoop.html

About the Author

Chip Wood has been a K-8 teacher, principal, and teacher educator for over 30 years. He is a cofounder of the Northeast Foundation for Children and is currently senior planner for the organization. His works include the books *Time to Teach, Time to Learn: Changing the Pace of School* and *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom Ages 4-14*, and the videos *Seven Principles of The Responsive Classroom* and *The Importance of Child Development in Education: Conversation with James Comer and Chip Wood*

In Print

“Who Needs Homework?” This Feb. 7, 2000, Washington Post article describes the history of homework, the lack of homework standards, and the controversy over amount and quality.

“A Prescription for Peace.” This article by Howard Gardner, which appeared in the January 25, 1999, issue of Time Magazine, urges parents to treat homework as an opportunity and not a threat. He urges parents to try to make homework assignments fun for their children.

“The Homework Ate My Family.” This January 25, 1999, Time Magazine article follows a San Francisco sixth grader for a week to see what influence homework has on her life. It also summarizes research on homework by Julian Betts, Harris Cooper, Carol Huntsinger, and others.

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