



Homework Requires Teamwork— Between Teachers and Parents

by Robert C. Hanna

Summary

Evidence is strong that homework improves student achievement, especially when coupled with strong parental support. Both teachers and parents should remember to place appropriate emphasis on the importance of homework.

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Generations of Americans have experienced homework, first as children and later as parents. For much of our history, parents could usually be counted on to support the judgment of the teacher in assigning it in the first place. How times have changed!

The evidence is strong that homework improves student achievement, especially when it is coupled with strong parental support. Indeed, without parents making it their responsibility to see that homework is done, and providing guidance to the student when needed, the best intentions of the best teachers will be at least partially thwarted. Writing in the Jan. 25, 1999, issue of Time magazine, researcher Romesh Ratnesar concluded that requiring a reasonable amount of challenging homework “encourages good study habits and acclimates students to self-directed work.” Janine Bempechat, a professor in the Harvard Graduate School of Education, says that the assignment of homework “helps children to develop qualities that all teachers like to see in the classroom, such as persistence, diligence, and the ability to delay gratification.”

Not long ago, it was common for parents and teachers to frequently discuss the subject of homework and to agree on its value. Questions parents raised included how much should be assigned, how much time should be permitted, and to what extent it was permissible for parents to help. We now have some teachers who assign little homework and too many parents who don’t accept responsibility for making sure students get it done. As one Michigan public school second-grade teacher wrote home to parents, “I realize that many of the children are in Campfire, Brownies, Cub Scouts, gymnastics, Awana, etc. These are wonderful activities to be involved with and very important to the children. However, I still think the children can read a page or two even on those days.” If little is asked of students and parents, little should be expected back.

There also are teachers who assign no homework at all. Students, they explain, will not do it anyway. But by not assigning homework or by having no consequences for homework turned in late or not at all, teachers cause the very outcome they predicted. And neglectful parents only reinforce a lax attitude when it comes to studies, which makes matters worse.

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Some teachers stop teaching early in the class period and tell their students to work on their homework. They explain that this is the only way homework will actually be done. But is it homework if it's done during class time?

When the quantity of homework is excessive or when "busywork" is assigned, little is learned and negative attitudes can develop in the children toward homework, the subject matter, the teacher, and even school itself. But these are not reasons to assign no homework. The best safeguards are good principals hiring competent teachers in the first place and actively monitoring each teacher's effectiveness, while parents pay close attention to homework content.

Schools should have, as many do, homework policies published in both the faculty handbook and the parent/student handbook. For instance, the Will Carleton Academy (a Michigan charter school) informs teachers, parents, and children that seventh- and eighth-graders can expect 60 minutes of homework daily, sixth-graders 50 minutes, down to 10 minutes for children in kindergarten.

For older students, Hillsdale Academy in Hillsdale, Mich., implements a sound practice. This school progressively increases the quantity and quality of required homework for students in grades nine through 12, with the following published policy for students, parents, and teachers alike:

If a student spends more time on homework than designated [in the handbook], the teacher who assigned the homework should be promptly informed so that corrective measures can be taken. While, occasionally, homework assignments will require more than the designated time, if a student is spending excessive time on homework with little likelihood of satisfactory completion, the parent should help the student find a reasonable stopping point and then attach to the homework a note detailing the time spent on the incomplete assignment. The teacher will accept the homework and will then call the parent to review the circumstances.

Learning both in school *and* at home can make the difference between mediocre and exemplary academic achievement. If more Michigan teachers were conscientious in assigning homework and if more parents backed them up, we might soon be reading more stories in the newspapers about successful schools and students.

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