

Beyond Class Time

Averting the Homework Crisis

by Neil T. Glazer and Sharron Williams

At Shaker Heights Middle School, four after-school programs help students complete their homework assignments.

From Charleston, North Carolina, to San Juan Capistrano, California, teachers and school administrators are agonizing over a growing crisis in many classrooms. Students are simply not doing their homework. Most of us know that students who consistently do their homework perform better in school. We also know that just doing the homework isn't enough; completing the entire assignment is what makes the difference between students' success or failure.

As administrators and teachers at Shaker Heights Middle School in Ohio, we want to help our 940 students—51 percent African American, 44 percent white, and 5 percent Hispanic and Asian American—complete their homework assignments. To deliver this important academic message, administrators meet with each of our eight middle school teams—approximately 110 students and five teachers comprise each team—during the first week of school. We start by sharing the recipes for school success that high school seniors have offered when they graduated, focusing on four key ingredients for achieving academic success.

Successful students come to school prepared for work. A physician, a carpenter, or an airline mechanic wouldn't think of reporting for work without all the tools necessary for the job. Students must come to school with pencils, paper, and a receptiveness to learning.

Students must take personal responsibility for their own learning. They will not succeed if they blame the system, their parents, or their teachers, or if they allow themselves to get sidetracked by distractions.

School work takes effort. Students get out of school what they put into school. If school seems too easy, then they are not putting forth their best efforts.

Successful students complete their homework every day. Those students who never seem to find time to complete their assignments will not succeed in school. Even if students don't have a specific assignment, they must take the time to review previous assignments or to start a long-term project.

We also share the results of our survey of middle school students, who described the roadblocks that kept them from completing homework. Their answers revealed several concerns.

- If I'm confused about a question, there is nobody to help me at home.
- Once I get home, it's hard to do schoolwork because there are so many other things I like to do.
- Sometimes I forget my assignments.
- I don't have a place at home to do my schoolwork.
- I need more encouragement to do schoolwork at home.
- If I'm absent from school, it's hard to find out what I missed. I don't have a good friend in every one of my classes who can tell me my assignments.

Our After-School Programs

Then we explain the school's four practical programs that address these concerns.

After-School Academic Sessions

Working closely with the faculty and the teachers' association, we have scheduled an after-school hour for modified small-group instruction. On Tuesday through Friday afternoons, teachers work with students between the official closing bell at 3:00 pm and the contractual end of the teachers' workday at 4:00 pm. Clubs, organizations, and athletics may not begin until 4:00 pm, and the students who participate in these activities must present a pass from a teacher verifying attendance at an after-school academic session.

Students who stay for the after-school hour may choose which teacher's classroom they will go to for study. Some days, usually just before a major test, a teacher may work with a sizable group of students during this hour. On other days, a teacher may work with a small group and, occasionally, may have no students. We have adjusted the school's bus schedules to accommodate the many students who take the bus to and from school. Parents support our efforts to make academics a top priority. Students see this after-school academic session as an opportunity to start their homework and to get answers to questions about their assignments.

The Homework Center

To help the students who voiced a concern over lack of space, time, or motivation to do their homework after they left school, we opened a homework center. Two teachers receive extra pay to staff the center from the end of the after-school academic session at 4:00 pm to the end of the activities period at 5:15 pm. The homework center uses classrooms adjacent to the exit closest to the bus pick-up area. As with the after-school academic sessions, the center attracts more students when progress reports are about to come out or when a grading period is drawing to a close. Parents support the homework center and help us encourage students to use the center.

Aside from responding to the students' need for a quiet space to complete homework, the center also addresses the need of students who may otherwise be unsupervised before their parents arrive home from work. Some parents require their children to attend the homework center and pick the students up at school on the way home from work.

The Homework Hotline

Many students indicated that they often misplace their lists of homework assignments somewhere between school and home. All students receive a planner for listing homework assignments and upcoming special events. Many teachers require students to copy homework assignments into the planner, but sometimes the planner doesn't get home, either.

As a service to students and parents, we have installed a special telephone homework assignment hotline that is accessible 24 hours a day, with special codes for each teacher's course. To make sure that everyone has the code numbers, we include a list of all the teachers' hotline codes in the monthly newsletter that we send home to parents. Teachers can record their assignments on the hotline from school or from home. On Tuesdays, the teachers call in assignments for Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. On Thursday afternoons, teachers call in assignments for Friday, the weekend, and Monday of the following week. Teachers also use the hotline to offer words of encouragement and to announce upcoming tests, field trips, and special assembly programs. Parents have found this service an excellent way to check on school assignments. Students who are absent, sick, or even on vacation can obtain homework assignments by calling the hotline.

The University Tutorial Program

Colleges and universities surround Shaker Heights. Through a reciprocal agreement with nearby John Carroll University, we match university sophomores and juniors with one or two of our middle school students who have been identified as needing individual tutoring in certain subject areas. The tutorial sessions meet during the after-school academic session one or two afternoons a week. A middle school teacher coordinates the program and makes sure that the tutors and students have textbooks, appropriate work assignments, adequate space for tutoring, and access to our facilities.