

Homework--A New Look at an Age-Old Practice

By Kathy Checkley
Vol. 39, Number 7
November 1997

When she was a child, Mary Russo knew that going to school was her job. The time used to complete homework assignments was considered sacred. "There was always a place in our home for homework," Russo recalls. "My grandmother--who spoke only Italian--would bring me and my brother sandwiches and milk while we studied." And, says Russo, although her grandmother couldn't tell them, her actions "showed us the value of what we were doing."

Russo is now the principal at Samuel Mason Elementary School in Roxbury, Mass., and regularly stresses the importance of homework to parents. "Children have to understand that their work--school work--is important," she asserts, and they get that message when families make homework a priority. What's more, says Russo, making homework a priority gives children more opportunities to learn. "We want children to continue learning beyond the school day," she explains. "Homework is a powerful way to extend learning."

Russo bases her claim on her 27 years of educational experience, as well as on research that has shown a correlation between homework and student achievement and the development of critical skills. Although there continues to be debate about the accuracy of studies that link increased academic achievement to homework, there has been no disagreement among educators that homework helps instill in students a sense of responsibility, accountability, motivation, and self-confidence.

"Homework teaches students good old-fashioned values," says Dorothy Rich, author of *What Do We Say? What Do We Do? Vital Solutions of Children's Educational Success*. Rich, president of the Megaskills Education Center, believes homework "gives students practice in persevering and accomplishing goals" and helps them learn "to take responsibility for keeping their minds active."

Still, Rich concedes, in today's modern world, an old-fashioned approach to homework won't work. Teachers have to "sell" homework and make it relevant to students' lives, says Rich. Schools today, she adds, also have to seek parental support for homework and show parents how to reinforce, at home, what students learn in the classroom.

Homework for the Modern Age

"We can't keep assigning homework like the homework we had in the 60s and 70s," asserts Patricia Caspary, a 4th grade teacher at Franklin Elementary School in Fond du Lac, Wis. Traditional homework assignments were once the norm at Franklin, "but students weren't getting it done--they kept forgetting their homework." So Caspary and her colleagues tried a different approach. "We decided we needed to look at these kids and come up with an approach to homework that respects their lives," says Caspary.

They began by creating a mission statement that identifies homework as "any activity where learning is extended after school." This is not necessarily work done at home, Caspary explains, "but any work outside the classroom that isn't teacher directed." Teachers also decided that students should have multiple ways to complete homework assignments and that those assignments must be adaptable, enabling students to complete their homework with the resources available to them. For example, one of Caspary's favorite assignments requires students to bake enough cookies for everyone in the class, which requires students to double or triple their cookie recipes. Students who don't have access to a kitchen or baking supplies can complete the homework by converting a recipe that makes six servings into one that makes 18 servings. Such flexible assignments are important, says Caspary, because Franklin's student body is diverse. "We have some students who have access to every resource; we have some students who have nothing," she notes.

David Boers, author of *Happy Classrooms*, applauds the school's approach to homework as one that is realistic. For too long, he says, teachers gave assignments that "discouraged learners by giving them homework they couldn't do and then punishing them when they didn't do it." Boers, a professor of graduate education at Marian College, describes as "discouraging" those assignments that require students "to go home and color" without ensuring that all students have crayons, for example.

According to Boers, assignments that feature "mindless, brainless stuff not related to a child's world" are also discouraging. A typical homework assignment for math, for example, requires students to solve scores of math problems. "If a student has mastered the skill in five problems, why should she finish the rest?" asks Boers. A better math assignment: "Ask students to watch a baseball game in their neighborhood and have them track one batter and record the number of hits he gets in the game." Students can then determine the player's batting average.

A little creativity goes a long way in designing homework that is relevant to students' lives, asserts Boers, who once taught middle and high school English. "My favorite assignments were those that gave students things they could do alone and without materials," he says. When studying the history of their town, for example, Boers asked students to "go out and talk to someone" about the history of their house and present their findings in class the next day.

Boers encourages the teacher candidates who now fill his classroom to develop their own homework philosophies and to "attach them to what they know about human development and growth." Boers also points out to his students that, as teachers, they must be able to justify the homework they've assigned. "If students ask, 'Why do I have to do this?', teachers should be able to respond right away and precisely," he says, adding that, "if you can't justify the homework and show how it fits in the curriculum, why bother giving the assignment?"

The Link Between Home and School

Rich agrees that teachers have a responsibility when assigning homework to "let kids know what you're teaching through the homework and why." But she finds that "this isn't typically taught" in preservice education or in professional development. What also isn't taught, says Russo, is the power homework has to engage parents in the school life. "Teachers need to consider how parents can contribute to a child's development," she contends. The homework policy at Samuel Mason Elementary School requires teachers to create homework assignments that are "interactive" and to include activities children can do with their parents or older siblings.

"We call our homework Homelinks because it's the link between home and school," says Peg Sands, a kindergarten teacher at Samuel Mason. "Through Homelinks, parents have an opportunity to reinforce learning, to become involved in their child's education."

The Homelinks program asks parents to guide students through the 30 minutes of homework assigned each night, except Friday. Each night's homework focuses on a different content area: On Monday, students take a book home, read it with a family member, and then do a short book report. On Tuesday, the homework focuses on math. Wednesday's homework is connected to themes, such as bus safety or holidays. And on Thursday, the homework involves practicing a writing skill--letter, word, or sentence recognition, or differentiating between uppercase and lowercase letters, for example. Parents then sign the completed homework.

The Homelinks program also features parenting workshops that teach parents how to best help their children complete homework assignments. When the homework requires parents and children to read together, for example, Sands and her colleagues share with parents "the kinds of questions to ask to help develop early literacy skills." When parents ask children questions such as, What is the title of this book? Who is the author?, children learn to "examine books and understand a book's parts," says Sands.

An emphasis on communicating with parents is also part of a new approach to homework adopted by teachers at Franklin Elementary School. Each student at Franklin now carries a "planner"--a notebook calendar of school days that allows students to record daily homework assignments and enables teachers to describe what was accomplished during the day. "These planners go home with the students every night and parents have to sign the books after they read them," says Caspary, who views the planners as a way to open discussions with parents. "There is space for parents to write their comments and they often send us notes" about what's happening in the classroom and how they think their children are responding. Parents welcome the opportunity to share their opinions, she says, and have responded favorably to the planners.

Students, too, are enthusiastic. "The students feel empowered," states Caspary. "The planners help them learn to ask: What did I accomplish today and what will I do tomorrow? The planners teach them how to plan." And teaching students how to plan is important, she asserts, because they'll need that skill as adults.

Gary Tubbs, the Director of Academic Achievement for the Seattle (Wash.) Public Schools, approves of such efforts to involve parents in homework. In Seattle, the district's homework policy, like many other such policies across the United States, provides guidelines for parental involvement and encourages parents to be "part of the solution in helping students succeed." School districts may have left parents out in the past, says Tubbs, but educators must now work with parents, who will, in turn, "work with students in a way that supports instruction."

"All parents want their children to succeed," says Tubbs, so deciding to uphold the homework policy is a not difficult choice for parents. After all, Tubbs points out, homework "puts