



The Homework Conundrum.....

“It seems curious that children are typically given additional assignments to be completed at home after they’ve just spent most of the day in school – and even more curious that almost everyone takes this fact for granted” (Kohn, 2006).

Parents and staff in our district are not satisfied with taking homework for granted. At a recent Superintendent’s Coffee Chat, more than a dozen parents expressed some concern about the amount of homework, the amount of time their children are spending on it, and how much family time might be suffering as a result of it. Similar concerns have been expressed at the site level in the parent surveys that are administered annually each spring. In response to these concerns our schools are taking action: Neil Cummins will pilot a modified "no homework" plan beginning the week of March 19 and Hall Middle School is starting focus groups of parents and staff to begin a deeper discussion of the issue. Our Trustees will be reviewing board policy on homework at their March 28 meeting.

Some of you have emailed a request to me for my perspective on the topic. As such, I have spent some time reviewing the most recent research and scholarly articles on homework. Since the length of this perspective is limited, I will cite only those authors for which the literature is predominant or who are considered reputable in the field of education. More research can be found in the references cited.

The most noteworthy finding from my relatively narrow search is that while literally hundreds of studies have been conducted in the last 20 years on the topic of homework, there are none that directly correlate the amount of homework to student achievement. The bottom line: student achievement is the result of many variables. Alfie Kohn (2006) describes how research is misused, misrepresented, and misunderstood, particularly as it relates to claims about the benefit of homework. Kohn’s article contains a most comprehensive bibliography of studies on homework. He reminds us that most homework in America is not assigned because it has been determined to be helpful, but rather it has been decided way ahead of time that children will have “homework” each night. Kohn believes homework should not be assigned as a default condition unless there are data to demonstrate its value for students. Most of us would concur with him; the greatest problem is striking that precarious balance between effectiveness, amount of time spent, stress and family activities.

Kohn spends much of his article reviewing major studies on homework, including those of Harris Cooper (1989, 2001). From this review, Kohn concludes the data to demonstrate the value of homework does not exist for the following reasons:

- There is no evidence that any amount of homework improves the academic performance of elementary students (Cooper, 1988).
- Most homework studies show only an association, not a causal relationship.
- Homework studies confuse grades and test scores with learning.
- The results of national and international exams raise doubts about homework’s role.

- No evidence supports the idea that homework provides non-academic benefits (responsibility, study skills/habits).

Ironically, most of the explosive growth in homework over the past decade has taken place with younger children—the age group for which studies clearly fail to show any positive effect. Studies conducted in the early '80's and '90's by Cooper conclude: there is no significant relationship between the amount of homework assigned and the amount of time spent on it, and grades or test scores, except between homework done by older students (grades 7/8+) and their achievement as measured by grades. This is a function of homework completion being used in grade calculation. Similarly, though many are of the opinion that homework builds character, there are no studies that have provided empirical evidence that homework teaches good work habits or develops other positive traits.

Even against a preponderance of research, most educators would suggest that some homework is worthwhile. Teachers agree that homework can help with reading ability and the reinforcement of basic math facts. To wit, there is much evidence that reading ability is linked directly to amount of time spent reading. With the onset of standards-based instruction, teachers also feel that one of the only ways to cover grade level standards is through assigning homework and extending learning opportunities beyond the confines of the school day (Marzano, 2001). Our question – when is a little homework, too much? Many schools use the 10 minute per night per grade rule, but even that is difficult to measure when you factor in the individual learning needs and styles of students.

We have observed that for some students homework is very stressful and that for others it comes more easily. We know that homework increases with grade level and that some homework requires parental participation—materials for a project, interviews with adults, transportation to and from classmates' homes, etc. Undoubtedly, homework has an impact on family time. Quality family time, even if only dinner together, plays a major positive role in the success and resiliency of our children as they grow up in a fast-paced, challenging world. I believe it is incumbent on us, as a community of learners, to do our own action research in relation to our concerns about homework. Can we find a balance and individualization, and at the same time live up to the high educational standards we hold for our schools and students and the family standards that create the neighborhoods we enjoy in Larkspur and Corte Madera? We must be willing (and able) to open the dialogue, search for our own answers, and implement reasonable solutions. Let's embrace the work of Neil Cummins, Hall Middle School and the Trustees as we explore unknown territory. The conversations are crucial, timely and may come with a cost, but our children and our families are priceless!

References

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- Marzano, R., Pickering, D., Pollack, J. (2001) *Classroom Instruction that Works*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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