The Great Homework Debate

By Susan McLester

How student-centered learning is impacting elementary-grade homework practices.

Homework is the cause of more friction between schools and home than any other aspect of education, says Harris Cooper, author of *The Battle Over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents*. Cooper joins a host of other researchers in finding the correlation between homework and achievement in the early grades tenuous at best. The debate over homework has raged more or less intensely over the past 100 years, depending on political, and economic circumstances, such as concern over childhood stress and international competition. Most recently, the move toward a more student-centered education has again brought the homework debate to the fore.

With some exceptions, there is growing agreement among today’s education leaders that homework should follow the 10-minute rule—10 minutes for first grade, 20 minutes for second grade, and so on—and be “non-worksheet” meaningful. Meaningful homework should make kids more excited about learning, help them think more deeply, reinforce academics, establish closer bonds between parent and child, and foster the home-school connection.

With Cooper’s and other researchers’ recommendations in mind, here are three successful, alternative approaches to traditional homework.

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**Keep It Real**

The deeper thinking that comes from the challenge of solving a real-world problem has resulted in much greater engagement for students both in and outside of the classroom, says Kristin Bishop, principal of Davis Elementary School in Plano, Texas. Last year, Davis Elementary fifth-graders were tasked with redesigning a structure such as their homes, and making it work within a budget. This year, third-graders are designing a community playground, and reaching beyond school boundaries to confer via Skype with experts on such topics as recreation programs and playground equipment. Long-term, project-based learning assignments such as these meet a broad range of state and national math and science standards, as well as put responsibility for learning into the hands of kids.

**Keep It Interesting**

Student-led learning and tutoring have proved key to homework success at Juneau, Wisconsin’s Dodgeland Elementary School, says principal Jessica Johnson. Instead of grading students on math homework, teachers use a flipped model that builds in reflection and collaboration. Students check their work in class—with time to ask questions and review difficult problems—and are then checked to see if they can solve problems independently. Students also pair up to compare answers and work through problems to learn from mistakes. Choice and variety are also key, say Cooper and others. Primary-grade students at Davis Elementary demonstrate knowledge of spelling patterns through photos of their choice, showing them spelling out words through body positions, practicing spelling while swinging, or, for hearing-impaired students, spelling in sign language.

For second-graders at Davis Elementary, math, science, and parent engagement meet in a task to choose a recipe, grocery shop, read labels and compare pricing. “Parents were excited to post pictures of their kids’ cooking creations,” says Bishop.*

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*The original version of this article mis-attributed the recipe activity to Dodgeland Elementary.

**Keep Reading**

The hands-down common denominator for any traditional homework alternative is reading. Regina Stewman, principal of Sonora Elementary School in Fayetteville, Arkansas, tells her staff reading is the only required homework.

A high-poverty school with a 45 percent ESL population, fewer than 20 percent of Sonora Elementary students have been read to at home, says Stewman. “They don’t know the rhythms and rhymes of language.” To counteract this, Stewman educates parents about the importance of reading to children—even in their own language, demonstrates what reading to a child looks like, and provides donated books that they can take home to read together. “We give parents the information, the techniques and the tools,” says Stewman. “More than anything, our goal is to promote literacy and a love of reading.”

What can school leaders do to encourage student-owned alternatives to homework? Says Bishop, “First, start with the staff conversation. Share what is working and what isn’t, and go from there.”

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