



Developing a Comprehensive Homework Policy

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IN BRIEF

The authors describe the results of surveys conducted by a small school district in Massachusetts to determine homework practices and beliefs, including time spent on homework, parent assistance, homework format, and balancing of homework and other activities. The result was the establishment of a comprehensive homework policy, including grade-level time limits. A sidebar lists the homework responsibilities of students, parents, teachers, and principals.

A two-year study of homework practices has produced a policy that balances the needs of students, parents, and teachers.

The endless debate over homework in American schools is perhaps best summarized by homework researcher Harris Cooper (2001), who noted that “Homework controversies follow a 30-year cycle, with outcries for more homework or less homework occurring about 15 years apart.”

How much and what kind of homework should be assigned to children? How much homework assistance should be expected of parents? Is homework even necessary? These questions and others troubled parents in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, where there was stress and confusion despite published guidelines on homework at all grade levels. Responding to parents’ concerns in early 2000, Superintendent

Anthony Bent formed a homework study committee of principals and teachers to collect, review, and discuss homework research and policies from other school districts. Recognizing the need for data from the district’s teachers, parents, and students, the committee undertook separate surveys of each group.

Results of the first survey, on teacher practices and beliefs about homework, revealed a diversity of

opinions about the amount, purpose, and format for homework, and the impact of homework on student grades. The findings provided the background for designing a survey that was submitted to all elementary and middle school parents in the spring of 2001. The response was remarkable, with 76 percent of elementary school parents and 48 percent of middle school parents participating. A third survey, in the fall of 2001, explored students' views of homework.

Some Survey Surprises

The surveys yielded a number of interesting and useful findings, with the sheer volume of responses indicating the intense feelings surrounding the topic. Many of the parent surveys were accompanied by extensive, thoughtful, and at times passionate comments. While there were many points of agreement among parents and teachers, a surprising finding was that even the students agreed that homework was important and the practice should not be eliminated.

Here are some of the other survey findings:

Time spent on homework. The amount of time students spend on homework was a major issue, with 83 percent of elementary school parents indicating their belief that homework should be kept to 15 to 20 minutes per night. Teachers differed in their expectations for the amount of time devoted to homework, with ranges of 10 to 45 minutes per night in grades 1–3, and 30 to 90 minutes in grades 4 and 5. At the middle school level, 45 percent of the parents responded that homework time should be kept to 60 to 90 minutes per night, while teacher expectations ranged up to 120 minutes per night.

Parent assistance. The study revealed that parental comfort with their children's homework declined as the children progressed through the grades. In first grade, 72 percent of the parents were comfortable assisting their child with homework, but by fifth grade the comfort level dropped to

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45 percent. Parents were least comfortable assisting with math homework (79 percent) and most comfortable assisting with language arts homework (90 percent). Asked how much homework help students should receive from parents, the majority of middle school parents (81 percent) felt their child's homework should be done independently and 47 percent reported that they should not be expected to assist with long-term assignments.

Homework format. This was another area where teachers and parents had somewhat differing preferences. Elementary and middle school parents indicated a strong preference for homework packets that allowed the child and parent to plan time in which to complete the homework. Teachers, however, were not in agreement about the use of packets and felt they should have freedom to vary their homework formats.

Balancing homework and activities. Establishing an appropriate balance between homework and other activities elicited strong emotion from parents and students. In the numerous written comments that accompanied over a third of the surveys, parents complained about the ways in which homework interfered with students' lives and family time. The survey of elementary school students revealed that 93 percent have one or more after-school activities on a weekly basis, with 42 percent spending two to four hours and 23 percent spending four to six hours a week on those activities. Their comments included asking for less homework so they could have time for other

activities important to their growth and development, such as playing with a friend.

The middle school findings strongly echoed the elementary findings regarding the burden that homework places on family life. The survey indicated that 99 percent of middle school students have at least one activity that occupies them one night per week, and that 42 percent of students are busy with outside activities three and four night per week.

Consistency of homework practice.

This was a concern for all constituents, with 92 percent of parents agreeing that homework should be consistent at each grade level. Teachers, however, were divided with some feeling that attempts to provide consistency would impact the flexibility of their classroom instruction.

Shrewsbury's Homework Policy

The homework policy that emerged from the comprehensive two-year study considers the academic as well as the social and emotional needs of students. Here are some of its provisions:

- Homework is defined as written or non-written tasks that are assigned by teachers to be completed by students outside of the classroom.
- The purposes of homework are to practice newly taught skills, review previously mastered skills, develop independent study habits, or to extend and enrich the curriculum.
- Homework should be related to the curriculum of the school.
- Homework should not be used as a behavior management tool or as a form of punishment.
- Homework should not be done by parents.
- Homework may be given four nights per week in grades 1–4 and should not be assigned on weekends. Homework may be assigned on Fridays in grades 5–8.
- Reading assignments are to be incorporated into homework time allotments at each grade level, but voluntary reading beyond homework guidelines is encouraged.

Homework Responsibilities

As adopted by the Shrewsbury Public Schools, the homework policy defines the responsibilities of students, parents, teachers, and principals.

Students' responsibilities:

- Get the assignment and ask for help if the assignment is not clear.
- Copy all assignments into planner (grades 4–8), carefully recording due dates and important information.
- Set a time each day to do homework.
- Check work and, if possible, explain it to an adult.
- Maintain the highest quality work on homework assignments.
- Take home all necessary resources, such as packets, textbooks, notes, and study guides.
- Bring the completed homework to school when it is due.
- Be responsible for getting assignments when absent from school.
- Be responsible for taking care of, and returning, any borrowed resource materials.

Parents' responsibilities:

- Promote a positive attitude toward homework as part of the learning process.
- Understand and reinforce expectations for the quality of student work.
- Provide structure, a site, and tools needed to help the child organize and complete homework.
- Be available to provide supervision and support, but do not do the assignment.
- Understand the amount of assistance appropriate for homework assignments.
- Communicate often with the student and his or her teacher, giving feedback to the teacher when there is a homework concern.
- Learn strategies and techniques for helping the student by taking advantage of opportunities such as parent homework clinics.

Teachers' responsibilities:

- Identify the purpose of homework assignments for parents and students.
- Establish objectives and guidelines for special projects, including any expectations for parent participation.
- Follow the guidelines for the amount of time designated for homework, including special projects.
- Communicate expectations to students.
- Post all assignments and provide time for students to record them.
- Model homework strategies and provide models as appropriate throughout the school year.
- Review homework and return it in a timely manner.
- Establish a system for recording and reporting homework.
- Ensure that resources and materials required for homework projects are easily obtained by students.
- Provide ways for parents to communicate with teachers about homework.
- Notify parents early regarding homework problems and missing assignments.
- Assign long-term projects so that the completion time includes more than one weekend and is not limited to a school vacation period.
- Discuss homework practices with colleagues and provide guidelines for the type of homework at each grade level.

Principals' responsibilities:

- Ensure that homework is consistent with the district educational goals.
- Facilitate communication between classroom and specialist teachers concerning homework.
- Monitor and support the teachers in the implementation of homework guidelines.
- Encourage teachers to use homework as a tool to reinforce learning.
- Be aware of the assignment of major projects and their impact on students' overall educational program.
- Support the need for balance among the many learning activities besides homework in students' lives.
- Facilitate the communication process between the school and home and help maintain the parent/school partnership as it relates to homework. (Shrewsbury Public Schools 2002).

■ Long-term projects should be assigned at least two weekends before the work is due.

■ Homework guidelines for students with special needs may be determined by the student's educational plan and should be specifically related to the student's learning profile.

■ The appropriate time limits that children at each grade level should devote to homework each night are:

Grade 1	15 min.	Monday–Thursday
Grade 2	20 min.	Monday–Thursday
Grade 3	30 min.	Monday–Thursday
Grade 4	40 min.	Monday–Thursday
Grade 5	50 min.	Monday–Friday
Grades 6–8	60–90 min.	Monday–Friday

The policy is being closely monitored by the district as a work in progress, with the understanding that flexibility is a critical element in any successful homework program, and that schools must be prepared to respond to the ever-changing needs of students and society. ■

References

- Cooper, H. "Homework for All—in Moderation." *Educational Leadership*, April 2001: 34–38.
- Shrewsbury Public Schools. "A Study of Homework in the Shrewsbury Public Schools." Report to the Shrewsbury School Committee, May 2002.

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WEB RESOURCES

Responsive Classroom provides the text of an informative article by Chip Wood, "Homework! Strategies to Overcome the Struggles and Help All Students Succeed." Also included is a guide to further online sources. http://www.responsiveclassroom.org/newsletter/12_4NL_1.asp

The American Youth Policy Forum presents a discussion by Etta Kravlovec of the book she co-authored with John Buell, *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning*. <http://www.aypf.org/forumbriefs/2000/fb112000.htm>

NAESP offers homework data and some useful tips for principals. www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1212

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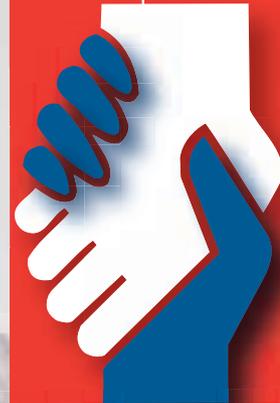
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