

# A Critical Look at Homework

Assignments should address each student's goals and circumstances to support learning

By Cathy Vatterott

**H**omework is a long-ingrained educational practice that is intertwined with teaching strategy, curriculum standards, and assessment practices. But the more we learn about effective assessment as educators, the more we see that certain traditional homework practices might be ineffective or inappropriate.

A critical look at homework should cause us to consider several questions.

## Is It Working?

The goal for any instructional strategy, including homework, is to improve learning. While research fails to show the benefit of homework in elementary school, it doesn't necessarily mean that homework has no value. It might mean that there is a lot of *ineffective* homework out there.

Common sense would lead us to believe, for instance, that children who practice reading become better readers and that students who practice math get better at math. The problem with math? If practiced incorrectly, "practice makes permanent" instead of perfect, giving teachers the difficult task of *unteaching!* This might explain why many elementary teachers no longer give math homework.



## THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The Pew Research Center says about 15 percent of school-age children in the U.S.—and 35 percent of those in households with incomes under \$30,000 per year—don't have high-speed internet access in their homes, making it difficult to complete digital homework assignments. Nearly one-quarter (24 percent) of children in low-income households report they "often" or "sometimes" are unable to complete homework due to the lack of a reliable computer or internet connection.

Common sense also says that students differ in readiness and learning preferences, yet teachers often assign the same homework to everyone. They may think that the task itself is infallible—one sure way to reach a learning goal. But not all students will benefit from the same task.

Homework should move the *individual* student toward a learning goal. What works best is to set a learning goal for each homework assignment, give the student some choice of method, and have students self-assess how effective that method was in reaching the goal.

### Is It Worth It?

More parents are demanding that schools reel in excessive homework loads, concerned about stress, sleep deprivation, and the loss of family and free time. Many parents are weary of the nightly battle over homework and question the value of homework that looks like busywork.

Another concern in elementary school is the potential for homework to shape student attitudes. Starting in kindergarten, the goal should be to make sure that students don't develop negative feelings about school, learning, and their own progress. These concerns and parental pushback have contributed to the trend of elementary schools limiting or eliminating homework.

### Is It Fair?

In schools serving a range of socioeconomic groups, homework can exacerbate class differences between the "haves" and the "have-nots." We don't always know the limitations of a student's home environment, and we might need to gather information from parents and students about family schedules, responsibilities, activities, and resources.

"My mom won't let me do homework," one 13-year-old said. "When I get home from school, I have to cook dinner, do chores, and then I have to give my brothers and sisters a bath."

The safest advice is to err on the side of the "have-nots" and avoid making assumptions about a child's environment. When assigning homework:

- Do not assume the child has a quiet place to do homework.
- Do not assume the child has a parent who is home in the evening.
- Do not assume the child's parents speak and read English.
- Do not assume the family has money for school supplies.
- Do not assume the child has access to materials such as paper, scissors, glue, or a calculator.
- Do not assume the child has access to a computer or the internet.

### A Level Field

To ensure a level playing field for a variety of students, promote homework practices that do not penalize students for their home environment or amount of parental involvement. Here are some suggestions:

#### Stop counting homework in the grade.


Counting homework in the grade can be unfair, since students differ in the amount of support and resources they receive. In addition, homework is completed out of sight; we often don't know who did it or how much "help" they got from parents or the internet. We might be grading a parent or an older brother!

The current consensus is that homework should be used as formative assessment that garners feedback but does not count in the grade. Ideally, homework can be reported separately as a work habit.

#### Send home only "doable" homework.

Homework that can't be completed without help is not good homework, since the level of parental help available varies. Give students a few minutes in class to begin homework, so they can be confident they can complete it on their own. Don't penalize students for parental behavior, such as when a parent forgets to sign the reading log.

**Ban the bench.** When homework is not completed, it might be due to circumstances beyond the student's control. If you don't know why the homework isn't done, it's unfair to require students to miss recess or lunch to complete it. No matter how you spin it, it feels like punishment.

Homework is just one part of an overall instructional plan. As our curricula, teaching strategies, and assessment strategies evolve to better meet student needs, so, too, should our homework practices. Only by creating assignments that are effective and equitable can we make homework a valuable part of instruction and learning. 

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