

Indicator: The schools homework policy makes homework a part of the student's report card grade. (175)

Meta-analyses suggest a positive relationship between homework and achievement, with percentile gains from 8% to 31% (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006; Marzano & Pickering, 2007). Research indicates that “students learn best when homework is assigned regularly, graded, returned promptly, and used primarily to rehearse material first presented by the teacher at school” (Redding, 2000, p. 15).

Teachers should assign appropriate homework at instructional levels that match students' skills and provide positive consequences for homework completion. A survey of teachers of students with learning disabilities found that 80 percent of teachers regularly assigned homework, but few matched the tasks to students' skills and provided feedback or positive consequences for homework performance. (NWREL, 2005a)

Written teacher comments on homework, promptly returned to the student, are vital; graded homework that counts is most effective (Austin, 1976; Elawar & Corno, 1985). In *Classroom Instruction That Works*, Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) discuss the importance of homework and its two primary purposes: to give students practice that will reinforce learning, and to give students feedback based on teacher review of the homework. Student achievement can vary based on the kind of feedback provided by the teacher (Walberg, 1991, 1999). Grading homework is helpful, but homework in which a teacher has embedded instructive comments has the greatest effect on learning (NWREL, 2005a; Walberg, 1999). However, teachers should also be aware that different groups of students may interpret and respond differently to their feedback. In one study of secondary students, Xu (2012) found that “Black students considered homework more interesting in classes with more frequent teacher feedback than in classes with less frequent teacher feedback. On the other hand, White students considered homework more interesting in classes with less frequent teacher feedback than in classes with more frequent teacher feedback” (pp. 78-79). He suggested further research into this phenomenon.

Assigning homework for punishment is inappropriate (Redding, 2000; Walberg, 1984). Conversely, rewarding students and/or classes for successful homework completion can be a fun and effective motivation for students and staff. Some schools have a quarterly popcorn or pizza party, place banners outside the top classroom, or provide other creative ways to celebrate students' hard work (e.g., Redding, 1993).

Redding's (2000) research review found:

The effects of homework do not increase proportionately with the amount assigned, but rather with the frequency (or regularity) of its assignment, the nature of the assignment, and the teacher's attention to the student's work.

Homework is most effective when it is:

- frequent;
- directly related to in-class work;
- used to master rather than introduce new material;
- graded and included as a significant part of the report card grade; and
- returned to the student soon after it is collected, and marked with comments particular to the student. (p. 16)

It is important to note that the grading of homework does not mean merely credit for completion:

A more recent trend in systems of grading is the separation of assessment of student academic progress from the evaluation of the learning behaviors such as motivation, effort, homework completion, collaboration, and cooperation with others. An important distinction between more traditional report cards and standards-based report cards is the separation of academic topics from these learner behaviors and/or life skills (Marzano, 2006). In order to effectively report academic progress in a manner that promotes learning, “educators must take special care to ensure that essential cognitive or achievement goals are kept distinct from specific aspects of students’ behavior—such as effort, responsibility, punctuality, participation, respect for classmates, and the like—which also may be considered important goals in the teaching and learning process” (Guskey & Bailey, 2010, Ch. 2, “Developing the Reporting Standards”, ¶ 2). (Craig, p. 47).

Teachers may need professional development to learn to design effective homework assignments and to establish positive, two-way communication with students’ families (Shumow, 2003; Symeou et al., 2012). Homework is a primary point of interface between the school and the home, and parents are best able to support the school’s purposes for homework when they understand what is expected of students and their role in monitoring their children’s homework. Consistency from teacher to teacher and across grade levels and subjects, established by a homework policy, contributes to teachers’, parents’, and students’ understanding of the school’s purposes for homework and also reinforces students’ formation of independent study habits (Redding, 2006). Establishing, communicating, and carrying out clear policies will increase the likelihood that homework will enhance students’ academic achievement (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

Well-designed homework is also useful for building other skills, such as self-directed learning, motivation, self-regulation, and practicing good study habits (ADI, 2011; Redding, 2006; Van Voorhis, 2011b); it can also be a focal point of constructive family interaction and allows the parents to see what the student is learning in school (Redding, 2000). Shumow (2011) states, “researchers have repeatedly documented that parents with low income, limited education, or minority status are just as likely to help their children with homework as other parents (Lee & Bowen, 2006).” Families across a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and locations (both rural and urban) also play an important role in promoting desirable homework emotion management strategies (Xu, 2005; Xu & Corno, 2003, 2006). However, if there is no schoolwide homework policy, parents may become confused and frustrated. If homework is important, why do some teachers assign much and others none, and why do some grade the homework and count it toward the report card grade, while others don’t? It is important for the school community to collaboratively create and use a homework policy (ADI, 2011; NWREL, 2005b).

Instead of having to be content experts, parents should set regular hours and clear expectations for where and when their children will work on homework. When parents set the stage for students to do their homework, they communicate the value of learning, and encourage skills such as responsibility, confidence, persistence, goal setting, planning, and the ability to delay gratification. (NWREL, 2005b)

These subtle forms of parental involvement (parental expectations and style that communicate the value of learning through both love and consistent discipline) have been shown

through meta-analyses to be the best predictors of student achievement (Jeynes, 2010, 2011). The homework task assigned may also evoke different types of parental involvement, some more helpful than others; one study found “more open-ended tasks without clear predetermined procedures might evoke the most beneficial parent-child interaction” (Shumow, 2003, p. 20). Rigorous studies of homework that included an interactive element requiring children to talk with a family member at home about the assignment (and usually have it signed) have shown a variety of significant, positive outcomes, including improved student achievement, increased parent involvement, and better teacher attitudes (Bennett-Conroy, 2012; Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997; Van Voorhis, 2003, 2011a). Parents meetings or workshops may help supplement tip sheets informing families of the best ways to facilitate their child’s study at home (Priority Schools Campaign, 2011). In fact, training parents to be involved in their child’s homework may result in higher homework completion rates, fewer homework problems, and improved academics among elementary students (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008).

Action Principles for Homework Policies and Practices

- Review or develop a school homework policy with input from teachers, students, families, and administrators. Include it in the School Improvement Plan.
- Include guidelines about time (per grade level), purpose, feedback, and ways for students and families to communicate (with the school and each other) about homework.
- Use family-friendly language, consider multiple formats for distributing information, and translate the document as necessary to reach all students’ families.
- Include homework design and implementation in professional development offered at the state, district, and school levels.
- Recognize teachers who have met homework challenges, and provide them a forum to share lessons learned.
- Consider ways to guide families in supporting their children’s learning at home, including online assignment posting, homework hotlines, newsletters, or workshops.
- Establish mechanisms for two-way communication with parents about homework.
- Periodically conduct formal and informal surveys that include student, teacher, and parent views about homework practice and effects. Use results to improve future policy and practice. (Shumow, 2011; Van Voorhis, 2011b)

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