

Too-Hard Homework

By Malkin Dare

Homework has the potential to leverage teachers' limited lesson time. Let's say a teacher can spend only 30 minutes teaching her class how to add fractions with like denominators. Regardless of how good a teacher she is, it is unlikely that all of her students will be able to fully absorb this lesson and remember it the next day.

But if the teacher assigns an hour of homework devoted to this concept, then the extra practice means that it is much more likely that the students will be able to correctly add fractions with like denominators the next day. Certain conditions apply, however.

The best homework provides practice only on material that has already been taught (no new wrinkles, like problems involving adding fractions with unlike denominators). Also, it is important that students actually do the homework, and so compliance must be rigorously monitored.

Lastly, homework must be corrected as soon as possible, so that students' errors are nipped in the bud before misunderstandings are solidified by repeated practice. A further virtue of timely correction is that the teacher can find out right away if yesterday's lesson was ineffective, in time to reteach it is necessary.

When the homework tool is used well, as outlined above, it is very valuable. Unfortunately, few faculties of education inform their students about the characteristics of good homework.

Unaware of how to get maximum advantage from homework, many teachers do not monitor compliance. Even teachers who ensure that their students complete their homework, however, do not necessarily correct it right away. But these are minor flaws compared to the mistake of homework that is not an extension of what the students have already learned.

Not only do some teachers not use homework to consolidate the day's lesson, but also in some cases they assign projects that are far beyond most of their students' capabilities.

For example – a true story – a struggling grade 4 boy was asked to read two novels by a certain author, an early novel and a late novel, and then write an essay on how the author's style had evolved. Clearly, this teacher was counting on the students' parents to help with the project (they did).

In this situation, parents are damned if they do and damned if they don't. If parents do help with a too-difficult project, the teacher is misled about what the student is really capable of, thereby encouraging the teacher to continue to assign inappropriate homework.

As well, the joint homework sessions can be quite stressful and eat up time that all parties would rather be spending in a different way. The amount of actual learning on the part of the student is often moot. If parents don't help out with the project, on the other hand, the student will probably get a bad mark and feel stupid.

There is, unfortunately, no perfect solution to this dilemma. In the real world, most parents would rather not rock the boat, and so they compromise by providing massive help but leaving enough of the execution to the child that the final product looks like his own work. This allows the teacher to think that it is a good assignment because it has induced the student to produce work that is over his head.

With all its disadvantages, the compromise approach is probably the best. There is no reason, however, why a parent couldn't send a note along with the completed project explaining that Johnny tried hard to compose the sonata for woodwinds, but needed quite a bit of help. If enough parents gave this kind of feedback to teachers, it might make them think twice about assigning their grade 3 class a project on recombinant DNA.

It might also be helpful to hand teachers the information contained in the sidebar on this page.

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What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning **U.S. Department of Education**

Student achievement rises significantly when teachers regularly assign homework and students conscientiously do it.

Extra studying helps children at all levels of ability. One research study reveals that when low-ability students do just 1 to 3 hours of homework a week, their grades are usually as high as those of average-ability students who do not do homework. Similarly, when average-ability students do 3 to 5 hours of homework a week, their grades usually equal those of high-ability students who do no homework.

Homework boosts achievement because the total time spent studying influences how much is learned. Low-achieving high school students study less than high achievers and do less homework. Time is not the only ingredient of learning, but without it little can be achieved.

Well-designed homework assignments relate directly to class work and extend students' learning beyond the classroom. Homework is most useful when teachers carefully prepare the assignment, thoroughly explain it, and give prompt comments and criticism when the work is completed.

To make the most of what students learn from doing homework, teachers need to give the same care to preparing homework assignments as they give to classroom instruction.

When teachers prepare written instructions and discuss homework assignments with students, they find their students take the homework more seriously than if the assignments are simply announced.

Students are more willing to do homework when they believe it is useful when teachers treat it as an integral part of instruction, when it is evaluated by the teachers, and when it counts as a part of the grade.