

Maximum Homework Impact: Optimizing Time, Purpose, Communication, and Collaboration

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“Have you done your homework?” Homework is typically associated with students in school, but “doing your homework” describes proper preparation for a task in any setting. Because design and implementation are not always optimal, homework may require more time than planned, lack clear purpose or adequate direction, or stray too far from classroom learning. Teachers play critical roles in homework design, student perception, and encouraging appropriate levels of family involvement. This article provides research-based guidance on promoting healthy school homework habits. By understanding process issues of time, purpose, communication, and collaboration, teachers can help maximize homework’s overall impact and minimize challenges.

How Much Is Enough?

In addition to classroom instruction and students’ responses to class lessons, homework represents one important factor that increases achievement (Marzano, 2003). Several meta-analyses suggest a positive relationship between homework and achievement, with percentile gains from 8% to 31% (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006; Marzano & Pickering, 2007). Studies of time spent on homework also reveal positive associations with academic achievement for secondary school students (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006). Therefore, teachers expect students to do more homework as they move from elementary to secondary grades. Supported by research and the National Parent Teacher Association, many schools follow the “10-minute rule,” which advises that teachers assign roughly 10 minutes of total nightly homework per grade level (i.e., 30 minutes for a third grader and 80 minutes for an eighth grader). While recommendations for high school students generally follow this rule, students enrolled in challenging classes can expect more homework.

Research, which evaluates time spent on homework, reveals that some students, at all grade levels, spend over 2 hours per night on homework (5% of 9-year-olds, 8% of 13-year-olds, and 11% of 17-year-olds). Other students are assigned no homework or fail to complete assignments (24% to 39%). The remainder fall in the middle, completing less than 1 hour (28% to 60%) or between 1 and 2 hours nightly (13% to 22%) (Perie & Moran, 2005). Comparing these patterns to the “10 minute rule,” we note that some students at all age levels are not practicing skills through homework, either by choice or lack of opportunity. In contrast, other students may have excessive homework. These disparities should encourage teachers to examine and discuss their homework policies and to periodically monitor homework time so all students have the chance to practice skills without being overburdened (Van Voorhis, 2004).

Homework on Purpose

Most elementary and secondary teachers (85%) report that they use homework to help students practice skills or prepare for tests (Markow, Kim, & Liebman, 2007). While adults understand that homework's primary purpose is practice and learning, children's understanding of homework's purposes develops through school (Warton, 2001). In addition to improving performance, research suggests that homework may assist students in developing achievement motivation and self-regulation, competencies essential for students to manage their behaviors and emotions to reach academic goals (e.g., Bempechat, 2004; Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011; Xu, 2007).

Therefore, homework may address both instructional (practice, preparation, participation, and personal development) and noninstructional purposes (parent-child relations, parent-teacher communication, policy) (Corno & Xu, 2004; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Students typically complete homework independently, but some teachers utilize interactive assignments to periodically engage students and peers or adults in learning. Therefore, one assignment may effectively address multiple purposes: helping students learn, building study skills, managing time, and encouraging parent-child discussion. Teachers, students, and parents would benefit from assignments with more clearly defined homework purposes so home learning is more focused, enjoyable, and better connected with school practice.

Engaging Families

Because homework is often completed at home, parents or other family partners become involved in monitoring its completion, assisting with an interaction, or checking its accuracy. In general, students with parents who are involved in their schooling are more likely to: attend school regularly, earn higher grades, be promoted, go on to postsecondary education, and have better social skills (Epstein et al., 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, parental involvement plays a detrimental role when it undermines student learning and responsibility. Studies indicate that parents often feel unprepared to help, or they provide inappropriate homework assistance.

Numerous studies demonstrate that, when teachers invite family participation and provide clear direction or training, families usually respond (Epstein, 2011; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008). Productive family involvement in well-designed, standards-based homework can promote academic achievement and generate positive emotional benefits for both students and parents (Van Voorhis, 2003, 2011a, 2011b). These findings underscore the need for consistent teacher-parent communication about how to support student learning and professional development time for teachers to become skilled at creating engaging assignments (Epstein et al., 2009; Van Voorhis, 2004).

Sharing Best Practices

In an online strategy session of education leaders, teachers noted that the following actions would provide the most improvement for homework (Markow, Kim, & Liebman, 2007): ensure that assignments are relevant to the course and topic of study; build in daily time for feedback on assignments; and establish effective homework policies at the curriculum, grade, and school levels (p. 136). Other strategies include offering teachers time to effectively plan and prepare

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assignments, allowing teachers time to share best practices, ensuring that students have effective home support, and creating ongoing homework communication with parents (Markow, Kim, & Liebman, 2007). These improvement strategies highlight the importance of state, district, and school-level support for teachers to collaborate and discuss homework practices and to create ongoing partnerships with students' families regarding homework and school learning (Epstein, et al., 2009; Van Voorhis, 2011c).

These general homework research findings regarding time, homework's varied purposes, ongoing student–teacher–family communication, and collegial collaboration translate into specific actions for state/district and school-level leaders and educators. Using our knowledge, people, and time resources helps to increase homework's impact and student success.

Action Principles

State Education Agency/Local Education Agency

1. Review or develop a state and district homework policy with input from teachers, principals, students, and families. Include guidelines about time, purpose, feedback, and ways for students and families to communicate concerns.
2. Consider multiple formats for distributing information, use family-friendly language, and translate the document as necessary to reach all students' families.
3. Include homework design and implementation in professional development offered at the state, district, and school levels.
4. Recognize teachers who have met homework challenges, and provide them a forum to share lessons learned.
5. Consider ways to guide families in supporting their children's learning at home, including online assignment posting, homework hotlines, newsletters, or workshops.
6. 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.

School

1. Develop clear school and classroom homework policies (linked to state/district policies) and share them with students and families.
2. Conduct a homework inventory and identify various purposes in assignments. Edit or discard unsuccessful assignments, and consider ways to make homework more enjoyable. Guide families in how to assist in the process without doing homework for students.
3. Communicate regularly about homework expectations and respond to student and family concerns as issues arise.

4. Share homework challenges and successes with colleagues over the course of the school year. Coordinate assignments across teachers or subjects to avoid overburdening students with multiple projects simultaneously.
5. Evaluate the strength of homework assignments and policy through student achievement and student and family feedback. Revise and improve each year.

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