

Middle School Homework Committee

Executive Summary

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Committee's Charge

Develop survey questions to determine current practices regarding grading and also homework. Gather information regarding the identification of best practices regarding same. Based on the information gathered and analyzed make recommendations to the task force for better alignment with best practice regarding homework and grading.

I. Research Summary

The committee conducted an extensive review of available research to become knowledgeable about various aspects of homework, especially as it relates to middle school. Over a dozen research articles were read and discussed. These articles summarized over 20 years of research related to homework and represented the recognized experts in the field. The research has produced some profound and interesting results.

Types/Purposes of Homework

The research has identified 4 types of homework that have value: practice/review, preparation, extension, and skill integration.

Practice homework reinforces learning and helps the student master specific skills.

Preparation homework introduces material that will be presented in future lessons but does not require mastery of the information.

Extension homework asks students to apply skills they already have to a new situation.

Integration homework requires the student to apply many different skills to a single task. (Example: Students use outlining skills they are learning in Language Arts to identify major points in a Social Studies unit.)

While much of the research about homework is varied, one aspect of homework is agreed upon: It should not be used to teach complex skills and material. Preparation homework assignments may be appropriate to introduce new concepts that will be taught in future lessons. These assignments though, should be discussed and expanded upon, with explicit connections made to material presented in class.

Effects of Homework

Homework is a perennial topic of debate in education with many researchers identifying positive effects of homework such as immediate achievement and learning, nonacademic benefits such as greater self-discipline and organization, and greater parental appreciation of and involvement in schooling. Others argue that homework creates a loss of interest in school due to burnout, lack of leisure time, and parental interference. Research studies do show though, a correlational relationship between homework and student achievement. Homework can produce a positive effect on adolescents' performance in school. One study, conducted by a noted authority on the topic of homework, correlated the amount of time students reported spending on homework with their achievement levels. Many of the correlations in these 50 studies came from statewide surveys or national assessments. Remember though, that correlation does not mean causation, i.e. it is just as likely that high achievement causes students to do more homework as vice versa. Of those 50 studies, 43 correlations indicated that students who did more homework had better achievement scores, whereas only 7 indicated that those who did more homework had lower achievement scores.

Amounts of Homework

In terms of quantity, experts agree that the amount of homework assigned to students should be different from elementary to middle school to high school. A general rule of thumb for amounts of homework is the "10 minutes per grade level" guideline. This means that sixth graders should spend roughly 60 minutes (grade 6 x 10 minutes = 60 minutes) per night while eighth graders would benefit from approximately 80 minutes of homework (8 x 10 = 80). Research suggests that spending more than 60 to 90 minutes per day on homework in middle school potentially has a negative effect on student achievement.

Providing Feedback

The research on teacher feedback is somewhat muddled but it is agreed that feedback of some sort (grades, teacher comments, etc.) appears to improve the effectiveness of homework assignments. It is generally agreed that it is not possible or necessary for teachers to comment on all homework assignments. It is agreed though, that timely and specific feedback on homework can improve student achievement.

Parental Involvement

Generally, parents want teachers to assign homework, although homework can be a cause of conflict between parents and children. In general, homework assignments should not typically require parental involvement for completion. However, parents can and should provide support for the homework process as some research indicates that the children of those who did achieve better in school. This support can include:

- Setting a regular time for homework
- Identifying a location for children to complete homework where parents can monitor their activity
- Removing distractions (TV, telephone, etc.)
- Providing supplies and resources

Effective Homework Practices for Teachers

There is little research on connections between specific kinds of homework and student achievement. That said, there is agreement regarding teaching practices that increase the positive effects of homework. These include:

- Communicate homework expectations for students at the beginning of the year
- Homework should be purposeful. *Any* homework is *not* better than no homework at all.
- Make assignments focused and clear. Homework that tries to introduce or reinforce too many ideas is less likely to contribute to learning.
- Vary assignments by type and style.
- Assign an appropriate amount of homework.
- Provide constructive feedback that offers specific suggestions on how the homework can be improved.
- Communicate with parents. Parents should not be expected to know or teach specific information to their children. However, parents should know how they can support their child in completing homework.

II. Parent and Teacher Surveys

Teacher Surveys

The committee created a survey on the topic of homework for middle school teachers to complete. The survey was provided electronically and administered in mid-March of 2008. Data was collected from 78 staff members who completed the survey. While a copy of the detailed survey results are attached, noteworthy results include:

- There was strong agreement among staff that homework is important and helps students learn more while also helping students develop a sense of responsibility.
- The vast majority of homework assigned by teachers is for the purpose of practicing skills already taught in class. The second most common purpose for homework is to have students apply skills they already have to new situations (extension).
- Most teachers have a policy regarding homework and these policies include information on student expectations, grading, procedures for tardy work, and procedures for absent students. Notably absent from most policies was information regarding parent expectations.
- Teachers provide feedback to students using a variety of methods (grading, written comments, verbally to individual students, and to all students through class discussion).
- Most teachers believe it takes the average student somewhere between 16 and 30 minutes to complete their individual assignments. Depending on the number of assignments students receive in a given day, their total amount of assigned homework may fall well outside the bounds suggested by research.

- The majority of teachers spend only 1-3 minutes to assign and explain a night's homework assignment. This may call for greater study since research indicates the importance of students understanding assignments before leaving class.
- The vast majority of teachers provide students somewhere between 1-10 minutes of class time to begin their homework.
- The greatest range of responses appeared in the question regarding the homework grade as a portion of a student's trimester grade. Homework accounts for as little as 5% of a student's trimester grade while for others, homework may comprise 50% or more of the grade.
- Teachers generally do not talk regularly to each other about the homework they are assigning nor do they often modify or change homework assignments based on these conversations.
- Teacher perceptions of a parent's role in regards to homework mirror the practices recommended by the research.

Parent Surveys

Middle School parents were surveyed about their perceptions and beliefs about homework in late April 2008. Parents had the opportunity to complete either a paper version of the survey or they could go on-line to provide their feedback. A nearly equal number of parents from both middle schools (110 vs. 114) completed the survey for a total of 224 responses. Some interesting aspects of the responses include:

- The majority of parents (23.5%) noted that their children spend 30-45 minutes completing homework on a typical school day. The next largest response (20.4%) indicated their children spend 45-60 minutes completing homework.
- When asked to identify, for *each* subject area, what parents thought about the *amount* of homework assigned, the large majority of parents felt that teachers assigned "the right amount of homework" in all areas.
- The vast majority of parents believe that doing homework is important.
- A great majority of parents (71.9%) felt that the time their children spend on homework does *not* interfere with the family spending time together.
- A great majority of parents (86%) felt their children were capable of balancing homework responsibilities with other obligations/activities.
- Parents identified using the following strategies to support their children's homework completion: creating a study-friendly homework location in their home, removing distractions during homework time, talking about homework assignments with their children, and helping with projects.
- Parents identified "my child forgets to bring home books or materials" as the number one factor why their children had difficulty completing homework.
- The majority of parents reported that teachers in all subject areas provided them with information about homework expectations and this was done most commonly during Curriculum Night presentations.
- Parents' number one suggestion to improve the homework process for students was "making sure the students understand the homework assignment before leaving class."

III. Recommendations

Based on the research studied and information from parent and teacher surveys, the committee makes the following recommendations:

1. Create and adopt a district homework policy. While this policy should span across all grade levels, minimally a middle school policy should be adopted. This policy will help improve home-school communication regarding homework. A draft of a suggested policy is attached.
2. Provide the Educational Research Service booklet “Focus on Homework: Research and best practice” for all District 34 parents and staff. This document highlights many important aspects of homework, provides information on research, and contains valuable recommendations for teachers and parents that can enhance the impact of homework on student achievement.
3. Provide professional development for all middle school teachers on best practices related to the creation and assessment of homework.

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