

Memo for Metuchen Public Schools Homework Forum

Date: January 12, 2016

Recent research & articles about the effect of homework/stress

- [My daughter's homework is killing me \(The Atlantic\)](#)
- [Is the drive for success making our children sick \(NY Times\)](#)
- [Survey finds students stressed & bored \(USA Today\)](#)
- [Is homework effective \(Edutopia\)](#)
- [Homework-An unnecessary evil \(Washington Post\)](#)
- [Survey finds most freshman are not emotionally prepared for college \(NBC News\)](#)

Articles from New Jersey

- [Hopewell Valley school board limits amount of homework assigned to students](#)
- [South Brunswick parents remain unhappy about load of homework](#)
- Articles & board resolution from Princeton NJ
 - [Princeton Board of Education Resolution on Homework \(see page 2 for copy\)](#)
 - Article – [Princeton School Board bans homework during Thanksgiving & Winter break](#)
 - [Princeton BoE Policy 2330 on Homework](#)
 - [Princeton 2015 kick off message on homework free weekends](#)
- Articles & information from West Windsor NJ
 - Article – [High Levels of stress in students prompted district-wide changes](#)
 - Article – [West Windsor – Plainsboro end midterms and finals](#)
 - [December 2015 WW-P Feedback on no homework](#) (includes statement from Dr. David Aderhold)

Ideas & toolkits for change (see pages 3 to 8 for details)

- [Rethinking Homework \(Alfie Kohn – The Homework Myth\)](#)
- [Bring healthy homework to you school \(Race to Nowhere tool kit\)](#)
- [ACSD – The case for and against homework](#)

[Copy of Resolution from Princeton Board of Education \(September 29, 2015\)](#)

Homework Assignments

RESOLVED, that the Board of Education acknowledges that allowing time for unstructured learning, rest, sleep, play, family events, travel, friendships and personal, creative and kinetic pursuits are of critical importance to every student's academic achievement and social, physical and emotional well-being; and

RESOLVED, that the Board of Education acknowledges that winter and spring holiday breaks in the PPS district calendar are the only two extended periods during the academic year that allow time for these important life activities; and

RESOLVED, that the Board of Education acknowledges that when homework or projects are designed and deadlines are assigned in a way that requires students to work on or substantially complete them during the holiday breaks, students and their families are deprived of the unstructured time they need and deserve to pursue these other, equally important life activities; similarly, when tests or quizzes are scheduled for the first several days of school immediately following the holiday break, students are required to spend their holiday breaks studying rather than pursuing other important life activities; and

The Superintendent, working closely with district administrators, is launching a district-wide re-examination of homework policies and practices with the goals of enhancing the positive educational impact of homework and promoting student wellness and balance, and the Board shares these goals and supports these efforts.

THEREFORE IT IS RESOLVED that during the 2015-2016 school year the Thanksgiving, Winter and Spring recesses will be true holidays from assigned and suggested schoolwork for students; and

FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board of Education encourages the Superintendent to continue to work with district teachers and administrators to identify other ways to ensure that homework enhances both learning and balance for our students.

1. Educate yourself and share what you've learned with teachers, parents, and central office administrators. Make sure you know what the research *really* says – that there is no reason to believe that children would be at any disadvantage in terms of their academic learning or life skills if they had much less homework, or even none at all. Whatever decisions are made should be based on fact rather than folk wisdom.

2. Rethink standardized “homework policies.” Requiring teachers to give a certain number of minutes of homework every day, or to make assignments on the same schedule every week (for example, x minutes of math on Tuesdays and Thursdays) is a frank admission that homework isn't justified by a given lesson, much less is it a response to what specific kids need at a specific time. Such policies sacrifice thoughtful instruction in order to achieve predictability, and they manage to do a disservice not only to students but, when imposed from above, to teachers as well.

3. Reduce the amount – but don't stop there. Many parents are understandably upset with how much time their children have to spend on homework. At a minimum, make sure that teachers aren't exceeding district guidelines and that they aren't chronically underestimating how long it takes students to complete the assignments. (As one mother told me, “It's cheating to say this is 20 minutes of homework if only your fastest kid can complete it in that time.”) Then work on reducing the amount of homework irrespective of such guidelines and expectations so that families, not schools, decide how they will spend most of their evenings.

Quantity, however, is not the only issue that needs to be addressed. Some assignments, frankly, aren't worth even five minutes of a student's time. Too many first graders are forced to clip words from magazines that begin with a given letter of the alphabet. Too many fifth graders have to color in an endless list of factor pairs on graph paper. Too many eighth graders spend their evenings inching their way through dull, overstuffed, committee-written textbooks, one chapter at a time. Teachers should be invited to reflect on whether any given example of homework will help students think deeply about questions that matter. What philosophy of teaching, what theory of learning, lies behind each assignment? Does it seem to assume that children are meaning makers — or empty vessels? Is learning regarded as a process that's mostly active or passive? Is it about wrestling with ideas or mindlessly following directions?

4. Change the default. Ultimately, it's not enough just to have less homework or even better homework. We should change the fundamental expectation in our schools so that students are asked to take schoolwork home only when there's a reasonable likelihood that a particular assignment will be beneficial to most of them. When that's not true, they should be free to spend their after-school hours as they choose. The bottom line: No homework except on those occasions when it's truly necessary. This, of course, is a reversal of the current default state, which amounts to an endorsement of homework for its own sake, regardless of the content, a view that simply can't be justified.

5. Ask the kids. Find out what students think of homework and solicit their suggestions – perhaps by distributing anonymous questionnaires. Many adults simply assume that homework is useful for promoting learning without even inquiring into the experience of the learners themselves! Do students find that homework really is useful? Why or why not? Are certain kinds better than others? How does homework affect their *desire* to learn? What are its other effects on their lives, and on their families?

6. Suggest that teachers assign only what they design. In most cases, students should be asked to do only what teachers are willing to create themselves, as opposed to prefabricated worksheets or generic exercises photocopied from textbooks. Also, it rarely makes sense to give the same assignment to all students in a class because it's unlikely to be beneficial for most of them. Those who already understand the concept will be wasting their time, and those who don't understand will become increasingly frustrated. There is no perfect assignment that will stimulate every student because one size simply doesn't fit all. On those days when homework really seems necessary, teachers should create several assignments fitted to different interests and capabilities. But it's better to give no homework to anyone than the same homework to everyone.

7. Use homework as an opportunity to involve students in decision-making. One way to judge the quality of a classroom is by the extent to which students participate in [making choices](#) about their learning. The best teachers know that children learn how to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions. Students should have something to say about what they're going to learn and the circumstances under which they'll learn it, as well as how (and when) their learning will be evaluated, how the room will be set up, how conflicts will be resolved, and a lot more.

What is true of education in general is true of homework in particular. At least two investigators have found that the most impressive teachers (as defined by various criteria) tend to involve students in decisions about assignments rather than simply telling them what they'll have to do at home. A reasonable first question for a parent to ask upon seeing a homework assignment is "How much say did the kids have in determining how this had to be done, and on what schedule, and whether it really needed to be completed at home in the first place?"

A discussion about whether homework might be useful (and why) can be valuable in its own right. If opinions are varied, the question of what to do when everyone doesn't agree – take a vote? keep talking until we reach consensus? look for a compromise? – develops social skills as well as intellectual growth. And that growth occurs precisely because the teacher asked rather than told. Teachers who consult with their students on a regular basis would shake their heads vigorously were you to suggest that kids will always say no to homework – or to anything else that requires effort. It's just not true, they'll tell you. When students are treated with respect, when the assignments are worth doing, most kids relish a challenge.

If, on the other hand, students groan about, or try to avoid, homework, it's generally because they get too much of it, or because it's assigned thoughtlessly and continuously, or simply because they had nothing to say about it. The benefits of even high-quality assignments are limited if students feel "done to" instead of "worked with."

8. Help teachers move away from grading. Your faculty may need your support, encouragement, and practical suggestions to help them abandon a model in which assignments are checked off or graded, where the point is to enforce compliance, and toward a model in which students explain and explore with one another what they've done – what they liked and disliked about the book they read, what they're struggling with, what new questions they came up with. As the eminent educator Martin Haberman observed, homework in the best classrooms "is not checked – it is shared." If students conclude that there's no point in spending time on assignments that aren't going to be collected or somehow recorded, that's not an argument for setting up bribes and threats and a climate of distrust; it's an indictment of the homework itself.

9. Experiment. Ask teachers who are reluctant to rethink their long-standing reliance on traditional homework to see what happens if, during a given week or curriculum unit, they tried assigning none. Surely anyone who believes that homework is beneficial should be willing to test that assumption by investigating the consequences of its absence. What are the effects of a moratorium on students' achievement, on their interest in learning, on their moods and the resulting climate of the classroom? Likewise, the school as a whole can try out a new policy, such as the change in default that I've proposed, on a tentative basis before committing to it permanently.

Guidelines (Race to Nowhere)

Healthy Homework Tool kit package for schools to implement change (PDF)

1. HOMEWORK SHOULD ADVANCE A SPIRIT OF LEARNING

Educators at all grade levels should assign homework only when:

- Such assignments demonstrably advance a spirit of learning, curiosity and inquiry among students.
- Such assignments demonstrably provide a unique learning opportunity or experience that cannot be had within the confines of the school setting or school day.
- Such assignments are not intended to enhance rote skill rehearsal or mastery. Rehearsal and repetition assignments should be completed within the confines of the school day, if they are required at all.
- Such assignments are not intended as a disciplinary or punitive measure, nor as a means of fostering competition among or assessment of students.

2. HOMEWORK SHOULD BE STUDENT-DIRECTED

Educators at all grade levels, but particularly in elementary and middle grades, should limit take-home assignments to:

- At-home reading chosen by the student.
- Project-based work chosen by the student.
- Experiential learning that integrates the student's existing interests and family commitments.
- Work that can be completed without the assistance of a sibling, caregiver or parent.

3. HOMEWORK SHOULD PROMOTE A BALANCED SCHEDULE

Educators at all grade levels should avoid assigning or requiring homework:

- On non-school nights, including weekends, school holidays, or winter or summer breaks.
- On the nights of major or all-school events, concerts, or sports
- When a child is sick or absent from
- When it conflicts with a child's parental, family, religious or community
- When a parent opts a child out of homework.

The above commitments will ask of school leaders that they provide teachers with professional development support and time to restructure their classroom practices to eliminate an over-reliance on homework.

Such support and restructuring will help us to ensure that homework can better:

- Support learning and engagement among students, regardless of family background, income level, or caregivers' educational status.
- Narrow the achievement gap by ensuring that instruction, rehearsal, mastery and remediation happens primarily at school and in the classroom, rather than at home, where resources and instructional support are less equitably distributed.
- Enhance family engagement with schools and students by providing parents and caregivers more opportunities to influence and collaborate on homework policy and practice.
- Provide time for students to develop a rich array of extra-curricular personal interests and to engage in meaningful family, religious, community, creative or athletic activities outside of school.

[ACSD Research – The case for and against homework](#)

In summary

1. 10 mins max per grade for higher grades. Homework is beneficial but more than 2hrs has been shown to be detrimental
2. Too much homework is bad for family life so could consider one night a month for 'family homework' such as game night or even something like cooking dinner, doing house work or mowing lawn
3. Students should be able to do homework independently without parental help as this disadvantages poorer students who may not have parent at home

From article:

Research provides strong evidence that, when used appropriately, homework benefits student achievement. To make sure that homework is appropriate, teachers should follow these guidelines:

- Assign purposeful homework. Legitimate purposes for homework include introducing new content, practicing a skill or process that students can do independently but not fluently, elaborating on information that has been addressed in class to deepen students' knowledge, and providing opportunities for students to explore topics of their own interest.
- Design homework to maximize the chances that students will complete it. For example, ensure that homework is at the appropriate level of difficulty. Students should be able to complete homework assignments independently with relatively high success rates, but they should still find the assignments challenging enough to be interesting.
- Involve parents in appropriate ways (for example, as a sounding board to help students summarize what they learned from the homework) without requiring parents to act as teachers or to police students' homework completion.
- Carefully monitor the amount of homework assigned so that it is appropriate to students' age levels and does not take too much time away from other home activities.