



The Community School
of Bergen County

*For the child whose
potential exceeds performance*

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What About Homework? A Balanced Approach at our Lower School

by Rita Rowan, Executive Director

Homework is a sensitive issue for children with learning disabilities and their families. Professionals working in programs for students with learning disabilities understand the anxieties that families experience when their children struggle over homework. At Community School we are also aware that when children move from a conventional setting into a specialized setting such as ours, families may experience a different problem with homework. They often have difficulty adjusting to the far lighter homework burden that their children may now take home.

Whereas, formerly, homework may have occupied three hours and the assistance, patience and indulgence of one or both parents, the homework given at Community School may take

perhaps an hour at the maximum and essentially allow the student to perform independently.

At our high school homework is viewed in a manner more age appropriate to its students needs. This is as it should be given the greater maturity of that student body and the more sophisticated requirements of the secondary level. In our lower school, on the other hand, we approach homework, of necessity, from a different set of positions. Recent research sponsored by the National Science Foundation and reported in the journal *Educational Leadership*, provides some reliable guidance.

In a nutshell, the findings were that homework, while very important as an educational tool at the high school level, is education-

ally useful in only a modest way at the middle and junior high school level. It is inconsequential below the middle school. Furthermore, the study tells us that though homework provides some definite positive effects, we have discovered that it may also have very definite negative effects that profoundly concern us. These occur most often in the younger child.

In order to maximize the real benefits of homework and to minimize the negative effects, we have evolved a policy that is guided by several principles. The most important of these is the acknowledgment that homework is an individualized instructional strategy like all others. It is one part of a total, individualized, remedial and therapeutic program. As such, the quantity and challenge level will be appropriate to the child's needs and abilities. It must not be compared to homework previously given in conventional settings or to the work being done by siblings, neighbors or relatives of the child.

Homework is given only in skills the student has already acquired; never in those that are in the process of being acquired. Homework in basic skills is most effective when it is routinized, regular and assigned on a consistent basis. Homework should never be frustrating or require instruction at home.

In content areas, it may be varied and more imaginative. However, then it must follow logically from the day's lesson and the child must be fully prepared to complete it. It may also require some assistance from parents, for example, taking the child to the library or some other designated destination, helping with the arts and crafts aspect of a small project, etc. It is important, however, not to overload families with homework related tasks.

We accept the principle that homework is a legitimate instructional component of each child's program. It helps to reinforce learning and to develop independence and good study habits for those children who are ready for it. Conversely, homework can be irrelevant or even counterproductive for others. In the latter case, the child has to be brought gradually to the point at which homework will be meaningful.

As a legitimate instructional tool, homework can never be used to accommodate non-educational needs. For example, it cannot be seen as a way to keep children busy in lieu of more appropriate after-school activities. It cannot be assigned simply because children watch too much television. Homework cannot be given because of concerns that the learning disabled child's education is not comparable to that of siblings and peers, nor can it be assigned as coercion, bribery, punishment or for other non-educational or therapeutic purposes.

Reactions to homework may vary. Many of the children in our population are intimidated by homework assignments or resist them. There are several explanations as to why they may do so. Some children lack the organizational skills to start or to complete assignments independently. The home environment may not be conducive to quiet concentration. Perhaps the child lacks a place free of distractions or is surrounded by too much activity. Many children simply forget, and need assistance in taking books and assignments home. They may need reminding that homework is to be done. The lack of a routine and a study discipline will certainly affect performance. And, finally, some children are simply not ready academically.

Despite all these problems, though, when homework is presented as part of an overall, well planned individualized instructional strategy, our

teachers can do much to help children become effective homework doers and to obtain educational benefits from the doing. The lessons we need to teach our children concern the importance of doing homework, the need for taking responsibility, practice in remembering and help in getting organized.

One way this is accomplished is to grade or check homework with the students. Grading of homework rewards effort and demonstrates that the teacher takes the assignment as seriously as the student does. Appropriate homework is also essential. A teacher can judge the effectiveness of an assignment by how completely and how accurately it is done. If students struggle with particular assignments, they are clearly not appropriate.

Another consideration for teachers is the amount of homework to assign. A neat rule of thumb is ten minutes times the grade level of the child equals the amount of time for homework. (Oppenheim, 1998). Thus, a fifth grader would be expected to spend 50 minutes on homework.

Regarding motivation, we firmly believe that children want to please, to fulfill their obligations, to achieve, and to establish mastery over their lives. All children gain important growth

experiences in winning their teachers' approval and in doing an acceptable job. They will not, without a strong purpose or motive, easily give up opportunities for approval. These ideas are important when a homework strategy is being considered.

When homework is assigned, the home must play its role through encouragement rather than punishment. It must provide sufficient support by offering reminders without anger or irritation. Consequences must also be in place to provide structure and limits (no television until the homework is completed). Rewarding accomplishments is also a must. And, finally, it is most essential that an atmosphere of tension in the home be avoided. Homework is a transaction between the child and the teacher. It is usually better for the parents to leave it at that. When properly used, it can greatly benefit our children by allowing them to practice at home what they have already been taught at school.

In summary, homework will remain an important issue for all of our students throughout their school lives. Developing homework strategies in a reasoned, individualized fashion is an approach we have found to be quite successful and of most benefit to our students.

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