Contrary to Herbert Walberg’s claims, research does not show that homework raises achievement scores or invigorates apathetic learners.

It is easy to agree that our goal in education is to see that our nation’s students achieve competence in prescribed areas of the curriculum; it is less easy to agree on just how to accomplish this. Perhaps that is why the cry for “more homework” rears its head every decade or so. It’s not particularly controversial—at least no one argues against it—and it’s easy and inexpensive to implement. What appears to be a bargain, however, may be nothing but a waste of time.

In a recent Educational Leadership article, “Homework’s Powerful Effects on Learning” (1985), Walberg and his colleagues examined a number of studies on homework, concluding that research “shows much higher achievement when homework is required especially if it is graded or commented on.”

A close examination of the research that Walberg reviews, however, does not support homework as a means of improving student achievement. In fact, the majority of the studies cited in the article have nothing to do with whether the assignment of homework does or does not affect student achievement (see sidebar).

Like Walberg, researchers have been trying to link homework with achievement test gains for the past 50 years but with very little luck. If research tells us anything, it is simply that even when achievement gains have been found, they have been minimal, especially in comparison to the amount of work expended by teachers and students.

Perhaps we need to treat homework as just what it is: peripheral to the problems that have plagued our nation’s schools for the past decades. To include “more homework” on an agenda for educational reform is embarrassing; it implies that we are nothing but amateurs if the best we can muster up for students who are failing in school, students who are dropping out at alarming rates, students who can’t read or write, is a recommendation that they ought to get more of the same thing.

It’s time for some common sense. We need to direct our energies toward building an agenda that has some permanency about it, one that will make schools more enjoyable places to learn. Let me offer four suggestions.

1. We must create learning environments that are conducive to different forms of study and allow students to advance through school at their own rate.

The drab “shoe boxes” we now call classrooms need to be replaced with environments that provide students more time to think and learn. The “talk-and-listen” method of teaching must give way to more interesting arrangements.

Individualized learning of the ’70s, meager as it may have been, has been replaced by group learning, group achievement, group everything. Everyone reads from the same book, does the same assignment, and graduates on the same date. In his book A Place Called School, Goodlad (1983) asked high school students across the nation: “What is the one best thing about your school?” Their most frequent response was “my friends,” followed by “sports” and “nothing.” Little wonder students respond as they do about schools.

2. Students need the opportunity to conduct serious study in school before any attempt is made to send work home.

Students rarely have the opportunity to interact with each other in school, to think, reflect, and pursue serious inquiry into problems and issues that are important to them. Take a stroll through any secondary school and you’ll be hard put to find students...
3. Students need more freedom and greater access to resources throughout their schools and communities.

Most schools operate within a vacuum, failing to take advantage of the many resources that are readily accessible to them. "Resources" means packing up a busload of kids and taking them down the road a few miles for a trip to the zoo, perhaps, or a picnic in the park.

Until we allow students more freedom to move about school, make decisions about their own learning, and participate in different forms of study, it is difficult to see how schools will ever be able to exploit the rich resources that are right under their noses.

4. New technologies need the chance to compete with chalkboard learning and expository teaching.

Unfortunately, too many educators are reluctant to admit, or even explore, the hypothesis that our current modes of teaching and learning are outdated. Goodlad's observations are worth noting once again:

The common absence of modern technological devices for learning in the classrooms we observed seemed to convey the implicit, erroneous message that these have nothing to do with the education process. The patriarch of the tools of schooling is the pencil, the matriarch is the pen, and the rest of the family is an assortment of crayons and plastic measuring sticks (p. 227).

A Final Note

In our rush to define an agenda that will improve our nation's schools, we would do well to pause and ask ourselves what "sweeping changes in teacher education" or "extending the school day" or "adding more math and foreign language" have to do with the picture that emerges from study after study of American classrooms: one of boredom, passivity, listlessness, and conformity. Where is the joy and laughter and cooperation and exuberance?

Along with all the rhetoric on ways to improve the education of our nation's youth, we must somehow come to grips with the possibility that our schools, given their current organizational structure and physical layout, may not be capable of providing our students with the education they need.

As long as we keep ignoring the realities of what it is that needs to be changed and keep tinkering around with such meaningless things as "more homework," we will continue to be "a nation at risk."□

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