

Homework Does Not Belong on the Agenda for Educational Reform

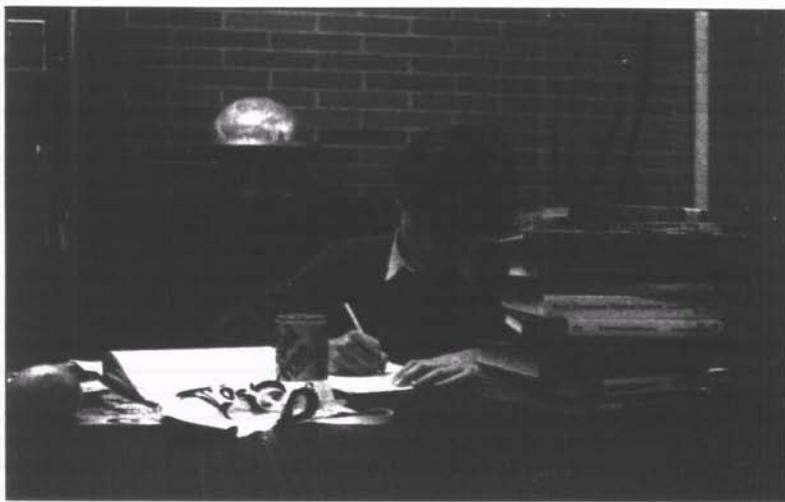
Contrary to Herbert Walberg's claims, research does not show that homework raises achievement scores or invigorates apathetic learners.

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



Photograph of Bremer Barber, 12, by Bill Barber

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

discussing much of anything. As Goodlad observed in his many visits to junior and senior high schools across the country:

It was rare to see students actively engaged in learning from one another or interacting with their teachers. Rather, students spend most of their time listening to teachers, writing answers to questions, or taking tests and quizzes (p. 124).

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.

Does Homework Have a Powerful Effect on Learning?

Of the 15 studies reviewed by Paschal, Weinstein, and Walberg (1984), which they cited in *Educational Leadership* (Walberg 1985), only four actually measured the effect of homework versus no homework on student achievement. Furthermore, most of these studies had mixed results.

For example, two of the four studies (Gray and Allison 1971, Tupesis 1973) reported no statistically significant difference between the homework and no homework treatments in achievement as measured by test scores. In other words, no evidence supported the assignment of homework as a basis for improving student achievement.

In another study, Maertens and Johnston (1972) found that 4th and 6th grade students who were assigned homework performed significantly better on achievement tests than those students assigned no homework, but no differences were found among 5th grade students participating in the study. It should be noted, however, that students receiving homework in this study also received parental help. Unfortunately, there were no treatment groups to measure the effect of homework on achievement when parents were not involved.

Finally, in the fourth study, Peterson (1970) found that students who had homework exercises assigned to them in math didn't score any better than students in the treatment group, who received mathematical puzzles. The puzzles were assigned in lieu of homework and were unrelated to the math concepts being taught.

The remaining studies reviewed by Walberg did not measure the effect on achievement of homework versus no homework: Joiner (1970) examined the effect of tutorial help on the grades of low-achieving students. Singh (1971) measured the effect of enrichment work on the reading scores of 4th through 6th grade students. Vitale (1978) studied the effect of reinforcement variables on student preferences for academic study outside the classroom. Four studies compared two different homework methods to determine which was the most beneficial (Dadas 1976, Dick 1980, Friesen 1976, and Urwiller 1971). Austin and Austin (1974) investigated the effects of two methods of grading homework. And Anthony (1977) studied the effect of the number of homework problems assigned on student achievement.

Walberg also claims, "Homework appears to benefit learning, especially if it is graded or commented on." Of the 15 studies cited, only 1 measured this relationship. In this study, Austin (1976) investigated the comments teachers put on the papers of students in grades 4, 9, and 10. Students in nine classes were randomly assigned to two groups (no comments versus comments on assigned homework). After six weeks, the groups were compared using teacher-prepared examinations. A significant difference favoring the comment group was found in only two of the nine classes.

While homework may have some effect on learning, the studies Walberg cites provide little evidence to support this claim. As 12 of the studies dealt with mathematics, we are left with little information as to the possible effect homework might have on other academic subjects. None of the 15 studies reviewed provided enough evidence to support the assumption that assigned homework will raise the test scores of our nation's students.

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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