



CATHY
VATTEROTT

Rethinking HOMEWORK

Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs



The image shows a spiral-bound notebook with a light gray cover. A white paper insert is clipped to the top with a silver paperclip. The notebook is placed over a background of several sheets of lined paper, some of which are also spiral-bound. The title 'Rethinking HOMEWORK' is written in a large, bold, hand-drawn font. Below the title is the subtitle 'Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs' in a smaller, cursive font. To the left of the author's name is a simple line drawing of a lit lightbulb. The author's name 'by CATHY VATTEROTT' is written in a bold, hand-drawn font. At the bottom left is the ASCD logo, and to its right is the text 'Alexandria, Virginia USA'.

Rethinking HOMEWORK

Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs



by CATHY VATTEROTT

ASCD

| Alexandria, Virginia USA

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For the children—
May their backpacks be light and their learning joyful.

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1

The Cult(ure) of Homework

Homework is a long-standing education tradition that, until recently, has seldom been questioned. The concept of homework has become so ingrained in U.S. culture that the word *homework* is part of the common vernacular, as exemplified by statements such as these: “Do your homework before taking a trip,” “It’s obvious they didn’t do their homework before they presented their proposal,” or “The marriage counselor gave us homework to do.” Homework began generations ago when schooling consisted primarily of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and rote learning dominated. Simple tasks of memorization and practice were easy for children to do at home, and the belief was that such mental exercise disciplined the mind. Homework has generally been viewed as a positive practice and accepted without question as part of the student routine. But over the years, homework in U.S. schools has evolved from the once simple tasks of memorizing math facts or writing spelling words to complex projects.

As the culture has changed, and as schools and families have changed, homework has become problematic for more and more students, parents, and teachers. The Internet and bookstores are crowded with books offering parents advice on how to get

children to do homework. Frequently, the advice for parents is to “remain positive,” yet only a handful of books suggest that parents should have the right to question the amount of homework or the value of the task itself. Teachers, overwhelmed by an already glutted curriculum and pressures related to standardized tests, assign homework in an attempt to develop students’ skills and to extend learning time. At the same time, they are left frustrated when the students who most need more time to learn seem the least likely to complete homework. Teachers are afraid not to give homework, for fear of being perceived as “easy.”

With diversity among learners in our schools at levels that are higher than ever, many teachers continue to assign the same homework to all students in the class and continue to disproportionately fail students from lower-income households for not doing homework, in essence punishing them for lack of an adequate environment in which to do homework. At a time when demand for accountability has reached a new high in its intensity, research fails to prove that all that homework is worth all that trouble. (The research on homework is discussed in Chapter 3.)

Although many people remain staunchly in favor of homework, a growing number of teachers and parents alike are beginning to question the practice. These critics are reexamining the beliefs behind the practice, the wisdom of assigning hours of homework, the absurdly heavy backpack, and the failure that can result when some students don’t complete homework. There’s a growing suspicion that something is wrong with homework.

This more critical look at homework represents a movement away from the pro-homework attitudes that have been consistent over the last two decades (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). As a result, a discussion of homework stirs controversy as people debate both sides of the issue. But the arguments both for and against homework are not new, as indicated by a consistent swing of the pendulum over the last hundred years between pro-homework and anti-homework attitudes.

A Brief History of Homework

The history of homework and surrounding attitudes is relevant because the roots of homework dogma developed and became entrenched over the last 100 years. Attitudes toward homework have historically reflected societal trends and the prevailing educational philosophy of the time, and each swing of the pendulum is colored by unique historical events and sentiments that drove the movement for or against homework. Yet the historical arguments for and against homework are familiar. They bear a striking similarity to the arguments waged in today's debate over homework.

At the end of the 19th century, attendance in the primary grades 1 through 4 was irregular for many students, and most classrooms were multiage. Teachers rarely gave homework to primary students (Gill & Schlossman, 2004). By the 5th grade, many students left school for work; fewer continued to high school (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). In the lower grades, school focused on reading, writing, and arithmetic; in grammar school (grades 5 through 8) and high school, students studied geography, history, literature, and math. Learning consisted of drill, memorization, and recitation, which required preparation at home:

At a time when students were required to say their lessons in class in order to demonstrate their academic prowess, they had little alternative but to say those lessons over and over at home the night before. Before a child could continue his or her schooling through grammar school, a family had to decide that chores and other family obligations would not interfere unduly with the predictable nightly homework hours that would go into preparing the next day's lessons. (Gill & Schlossman, 2004, p. 174)

Given the critical role that children played as workers in the household, it was not surprising that many families could not

afford to have their children continue schooling, given the requisite two to three hours of homework each night (Kralovec & Buell, 2000).

Early in the 20th century, in concert with the rise of progressive education, an anti-homework movement would become the centerpiece of the progressive platform. Progressive educators questioned many aspects of schooling: “Once the value of drill, memorization, and recitation was opened to debate, the attendant need for homework came under harsh scrutiny as well” (Kralovec & Buell, 2000, p. 42).

As pediatrics grew as a medical specialty, more doctors began to speak out about the effect of homework on the health and well-being of children. The benefits of fresh air, sunshine, and exercise for children were widely accepted, and homework had the potential to interfere. One hundred years ago, rather than diagnosing children with attention deficit disorder, pediatricians simply prescribed more outdoor exercise. Homework was blamed for nervous conditions in children, eyestrain, stress, lack of sleep, and other conditions. Homework was viewed as a culprit that robbed children of important opportunities for social interaction. At the same time, labor leaders were protesting working hours and working conditions for adults, advocating for a 40-hour workweek. Child labor laws were used as a justification to protect children from excessive homework.

In 1900, the editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, Edward Bok, began a series of anti-homework articles. He recommended the elimination of homework for all students under the age of 15 and a limit of one hour nightly for older students. His writings were instrumental in the growth of the anti-homework movement of the early 1900s, a harbinger of the important role media would play in the homework debate in the future. By 1930, the anti-homework sentiment had grown so strong that a Society for the Abolition of Homework was formed. Many school districts across the United States voted to abolish homework, especially in the lower grades:

In the 1930s and 1940s, although few districts abolished homework outright, many abolished it in grades K–6. In grades K–3, condemnation of homework was nearly universal in school district policies as well as professional opinion. And even where homework was not abolished, it was often assigned only in small amounts—in secondary schools as well as elementary schools. (Gill & Schlossman, 2000, p. 32)

After the Soviet Union launched the *Sputnik 1* satellite in 1957, the trend toward less homework was quickly reversed as the United States became obsessed with competing with the Russians. Fearful that children were unprepared to compete in a future that would be increasingly dominated by technology, school officials, teachers, and parents saw homework as a means for accelerating children's acquisition of knowledge.

The homework problem was reconceived as part of a national crisis: the U.S. was losing the Cold War because Russian children were smarter; that is, they were working harder and achieving more in school . . . the new discourse pronounced too little homework an indicator of the dismal state of American schooling. A commitment to heavy homework loads was alleged to reveal seriousness of purpose in education; homework became an instrument of national defense policy. (Gill & Schlossman, 2004, p. 176)

Within a few short years, public opinion had swung back to the pro-homework position. During this period, many schools overturned policies abolishing or limiting homework that had been established between 1900 and 1940. However, homework in the early elementary grades was still rare (Gill & Schlossman, 2004).

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the midst of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, a counterculture emerged that questioned the status quo in literally every aspect of personal and political life. A popular book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (Postman & Weingartner, 1969), attacked traditional methods

of what was labeled “the educational establishment.” Indicative of the times, a new debate emerged over homework and other educational activities. The anti-homework arguments were reminiscent of the progressive arguments of the early 20th century—again, homework was seen as a symptom of too much pressure on students to achieve.

Two prominent educational organizations went on record opposing excessive homework. The American Educational Research Association stated,

Whenever homework crowds out social experience, outdoor recreation, and creative activities, and whenever it usurps time that should be devoted to sleep, it is not meeting the basic needs of children and adolescents. (In Wildman, 1968, p. 204)

The National Education Association issued this statement in 1966:

It is generally recommended (a) that children in the early elementary school have no homework specifically assigned by the teacher; (b) that limited amounts of homework—not more than an hour a day—be introduced during the upper elementary school and junior high years; (c) that homework be limited to four nights a week; and (d) that in secondary school no more than one and a half hours a night be expected. (In Wildman, 1968, p. 204)

Not surprisingly, by the late 1960s and during the 1970s, parents were arguing that children should be free to play and relax in the evenings, and again the amount of homework decreased (Bennett & Kalish, 2006).

But by the 1980s the pendulum would swing again. In 1983, the study *A Nation at Risk* became the “first major report by the government attempting to prove that the purported inadequacies of our schools and our students were responsible for the troubles

of the U.S. economy” (Kralovec & Buell, 2000, p. 50). The report claimed there was a “rising tide of mediocrity” in schools and that a movement for academic excellence was needed (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). *A Nation at Risk* planted the seed of the idea that school success was responsible for economic success. It ratcheted up the standards, starting what has been called the “intensification movement”—the idea that education can be improved if only there is more of it, in the form of longer school years, more testing, more homework. *A Nation at Risk* explicitly called for “far more homework” for high school students.

In 1986, the U.S. Department of Education published *What Works*, which also recommended homework as an effective learning strategy. “Whenever you come across a particularly savage attack on the state of public education, it’s a safe bet that a call for more homework (and other get-tough messages) will be sounded as well” (Kohn, 2006, p. 120).

The pro-homework trend continued into the 1990s, as the push for higher standards resulted in the conclusion that more homework was a remedy. As noted earlier, this was not the first time homework became the scapegoat for the perceived inadequacies of public education:

Whenever reformers attempt to improve the academic outcomes of American schooling, more homework seems a first step. The justification for this probably has more to do with philosophy (students should work harder) and with the ease of implementation (increased homework costs no extra money and requires no major program modifications) than with new research findings. (Strother, in Connors, 1992, p. 14)

During the late 1980s and the early 1990s, an occasional journal article would question whether more homework was necessarily better, but those voices were few and far between. Most journal articles and popular books about homework took the safe

position of being pro-homework and focused on strategies for getting children to complete homework. In 1989, Harris Cooper (now considered a leading expert on homework research) published an exhaustive synthesis of research on homework (1989a) that seemed to have little effect on popular practice and received little media attention. In 1994, a board member in the school district of Half Moon Bay, California, made national news by recommending that the district abolish homework. The board member “was widely vilified in the national press as just another California kook” (Gill & Schlossman, 1996, p. 57). The general media reaction was dismissive; the story was handled as cute and quirky, as if the idea of abolishing homework were just plain crazy.

By the late 1990s, however, the tide would begin to shift back to an anti-homework focus. With increasing frequency, articles critical of traditional homework practices were published in educational journals. In 1998, the American Educational Research Association conducted a symposium on homework practices. In 1998, Harris Cooper’s latest research about homework (Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998) garnered much more public attention, catapulting the topic of homework into the popular press and landing him on *Oprah* and *Today*. In March 1998, the cover of *Newsweek* featured an article titled “Does Your Child Need a Tutor?” along with another article titled “Homework Doesn’t Help” (Begley, 1998). In January 1999, *Time* magazine’s cover story, “The Homework That Ate My Family” (Ratnesar, 1999), generated considerable media buzz. It portrayed homework as an intrusion on family tranquility and as just one more stressor in an already overstressed life, especially for two-career families. The article also cited a University of Michigan study showing that homework for 6- to 8-year-olds had increased by more than 50 percent from 1981 to 1997.

As homework increased, especially for the youngest students, and parents began feeling overwhelmed, stories detailing the struggle appeared widely in the popular press. Now the mood was

one of concern for overworked students and parents. In 2000, Piscataway, New Jersey, received national attention for implementing a homework policy that limited the amount of homework, discouraged weekend homework, and forbade teachers from counting homework in the grade (Kohn, 2006). Unlike the story about Half Moon Bay only six years earlier, *this* story was given serious media coverage, and the school district was deluged by requests from schools seeking a copy of the policy.

Also in 2000, Etta Kralovec and John Buell's book *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning* received massive media attention and spawned an ongoing debate between the anti-homework and pro-homework contingents. In 2006, two popular-press books kept the debate going: Kohn's *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing*, and Bennett and Kalish's *The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It*. Since then, the debate has continued with arguments similar to those first heard in the 1930s and 1960s. Like religion and politics, the arguments for and against homework stir intense emotions among parents, teachers, and administrators. To fully understand today's debate, we must first examine the beliefs about homework that have developed over the last 100 years and the cultural forces that have shaped them.

Laying Bare the Culture of Homework

Beliefs about the inherent goodness of homework are so entrenched, so unshakable for many parents and educators, they seem almost cultlike. For many, these beliefs are unexamined. Kralovec and Buell (2000) said it best: "The belief in the value of homework is akin to faith" (p. 9). The true believers hold homework in such reverence, many educators are afraid to recommend that we eliminate it completely. Too many people just won't accept the idea. How can anyone be against work? It's as

if the tradition of homework has been so romanticized as to be accepted as truth. Parenting magazines and newspaper articles accept without question that homework is part of school life and then continue to give advice on how to help kids complete it (Kohn, 2006). Freelance writers have learned that writing that is too anti-homework will probably not be published in the mainstream media.

To understand the *culture* of homework and how it developed over the last 100 years, it is necessary to dissect the dogma, which can best be summarized by five largely unexamined beliefs about children and learning. How many of these beliefs are based on fact, and how many are based on faith, tradition, or moral judgments?

Belief #1: The role of the school is to extend learning beyond the classroom. Many believe it is not only the inalienable right of teachers but their *obligation* to extend learning beyond the classroom. Inherent in this belief is the assumption that teachers have the *right* to control children's lives outside the school—that we have the right to give homework and that students and parents should comply with our wishes (more about this assumption in Chapter 2). Many teachers claim that homework keeps children out of trouble and that homework is better for children than television or video games. This view is rather dismissive of the judgment of parents to make good decisions about their child's use of free time. Is it really our job to be the moral policeman for our students' personal lives?

Perhaps our role in extending learning outside the school is to instill in students the value of learning and the joy of learning, and to expose them to the vastness of the universe—how much there is to learn. Perhaps our role is to help students find something in life they feel passionate about and to help them find their purpose in society.

Belief #2: Intellectual activity is intrinsically more valuable than nonintellectual activity. Many homework advocates believe

that intellectual development is more important than social, emotional, or physical development. Intellectual pursuits hold an implied superiority over nonintellectual tasks such as throwing a ball, walking a dog, riding a bike, or just hanging out. This belief presupposes the limited value of leisure tasks. Concurrently, some worry that too much unstructured time might cause children to be less successful, less competitive with others. As with Belief #1, this view shows a distrust of parents to guide children in the productive use of free time and a distrust of children to engage in intellectual pursuits on their own. In reality, physical, emotional, and social activities are as necessary as intellectual activity in the development of healthy, well-rounded children.

Belief #3: Homework teaches responsibility. One of the most resilient beliefs is that homework promotes responsibility and discipline. Even though there is no research to support this belief, many people continue to tout homework's nonacademic virtues (Kohn, 2006). *Responsibility* is often a code word for *obedience*. When we say we want students to be *responsible*, are we saying we want them to be *obedient*—to do *what* we want them to do *when* we want them to do it, to be mindless drones, blindly obedient to authority? One teacher said she thought not doing homework was a sign of disrespect for the teacher! When we say homework promotes discipline in students, does that mean being self-disciplined enough to do something they hate to do because it's their duty?

Many teachers are fixated on homework as *the way* to teach responsibility, as though we have no other avenues. Yet we tend to neglect all the other ways students *could* be given responsibility in the classroom—involving them in decision making about their learning, teaching them how to self-assess, letting them design learning tasks, or allowing them to help manage classroom and school facilities (Guskey & Anderman, 2008). Even in the task of homework itself, children are rarely given *responsibility* for choosing how they wish to learn, how they might show what they have

learned, or how they might schedule their time for homework. True responsibility cannot be coerced. It must be developed by allowing students power and ownership of tasks (Vatterott, 2007). (Chapter 4 presents more about how to do this.)

Another supposed virtue of homework is that it teaches time management. Does time management really mean the ability to delay gratification—to work when we want to play? Homework does not reinforce time management if adults have to coerce children into doing it; if children are coerced, they are not in charge of scheduling the time or making decisions about the use of the time.

If we are using homework to teach responsibility, won't 10 minutes of homework work just as well as 60 minutes? If we are using homework to teach time management, don't long-range projects that require scheduled planning do a better job of that than daily assignments?

Belief #4: Lots of homework is a sign of a rigorous curriculum. Many people equate lots of homework with a tough school, regardless of the type or length of assignments (Jackson, 2009). Parents will often brag: “My child goes to a really good school—he gets lots of homework.” If the mind is a muscle to be trained (as was believed in the 19th century), then more work must equal more learning. If some homework is good for children, then more homework must be even better. If 10 math problems for homework are good, then 40 problems must be better. This belief, more than any other, is responsible for the piling on of hours of homework in many schools today. Yet we all know that those assignments could be busywork, of no educational value (Jackson, 2009). More homework gives the *appearance* of increased rigor, and “difficulty is often equated to the *amount* of work done by students, rather than the complexity and challenge” (Williamson & Johnston, 1999, p. 10, emphasis added). Ah, if it were only that simple. More time does not necessarily equal more learning. The “more is always better” argument ignores the quality of work and the level of learning

required. Rigor is challenge—but it is not necessarily the same challenge for each student. Given the diverse nature of students, challenging learning experiences will vary for different students.

Belief #5: Good teachers give homework; good students do their homework. Probably the most disturbing belief is the belief in the inherent goodness of homework, regardless of the type or length of assignment. Homework advocates have believed it for years, never questioning whether it might not be true. This belief is born from both the belief that homework teaches responsibility and discipline and the belief that “lots of homework” equals “rigor.” If *good teachers give homework*, it naturally follows, then, that teachers who don’t give homework are too easy. This mindset is so ingrained that teachers apologize to other teachers for not giving homework! Yet we know that some very good teachers don’t give a lot of homework or give none at all. Instead of being apologetic, teachers who don’t give homework should simply explain that they do such a good job of teaching that homework is not necessary.

The danger in the belief that *good students do their homework* is the moral judgment that tends to accompany this belief. To children who dutifully complete homework, we often attribute the virtues of being compliant and hardworking. To children who don’t complete homework, we often attribute the vices of laziness and noncompliance. But is a lack of virtue the reason many children don’t do homework? Therein lies the problem. Students without supportive parents (or with single parents overburdened trying to make ends meet), with inadequate home environments for completing homework, or with parents intellectually unable to help them are less likely to complete homework (Vatterott, 2007). Are these less advantaged students *bad*? Of course not.

These beliefs form a dogma, a homework culture. The foundations of that culture are a trinity of very old philosophies. Homework culture is a complex mix of moralistic views, puritanism, and behaviorism. The beliefs that underlie the homework dogma

have been fed by our moralistic views of human nature, the puritan work ethic that is embedded in our culture, and behaviorist practices that still reside in our schools. The five beliefs and these three philosophies are so well entwined, it's hard to tell where one idea begins and another ends. An exploration of these philosophies will illuminate the foundations of the dogma that is homework culture.

Moralistic Views: Who We Believe Students Are

Historically, one mission of the school has been to instill moral values. Unfortunately, much of traditional schooling operates on the theory that children are basically lazy and irresponsible, that they can't be trusted, and that they have to be coerced into learning. They must be controlled and taught to be compliant. Therefore, it follows that it is necessary to use homework to teach responsibility.

If students naturally have a tendency to do evil, then they cannot be trusted to use time wisely. Idle hands are the devil's workshop, and therefore children should not be idle. This philosophy assumes not only that children don't want to learn but also that learning is inherently distasteful.

The Puritan Work Ethic: Who We Want Students to Be

No one would dispute that we want to encourage students to work hard. After all, hard work is what made America great, right? The Puritans believed hard work was an honor to God that would lead to a prosperous reward. That work ethic brings to mind the stereotypical stern schoolmarm, rapping a ruler against the desk and saying "Get busy!" The tenets of the puritan work ethic most evident in homework culture are the following:

- Hard work is good for you regardless of the pointlessness of the task.
- Hard works builds character.
- Hard work is painful; suffering is virtuous.

Here we see the origin of Belief #4, that more work equals rigor, and Belief #5, that “good” students do their homework and “good” teachers make students work hard. Unfortunately, when it comes to learning, the bleaker side of the puritan work ethic has also taken hold:

There is a prevalent myth that if a teaching/learning experience is too enjoyable it is somehow academically suspect. If it is “rigorous,” or better yet painful, then it must have merit. (Raebeck, 1992, p. 13)

The work ethic is obvious in views that homework is a way to train students how to work—that homework trains students how to study, how to work diligently and persistently, and how to delay gratification (Bempechat, 2004). Along similar lines, homework is also viewed as practice for being a worker:

Homework is *work*, not play. . . . It is assigned by a teacher for students to complete on the teacher’s schedule, with the teacher’s requirements in mind. So it helps to have the right attitude. Homework means business, and the student should expect to buckle down. As in the workplace, careless efforts and a laissez-faire attitude are likely to make the wrong impression . . . homework is, in part, an exchange of performance for grades. (Corno & Xu, 2004, p. 228)

The premise of Corno and Xu’s article is that “homework is the quintessential job of childhood”—as though children need a job. Which begs the question: Is our job as educators to produce learners or workers?

Behaviorism: How We Think We Can Control Students

No philosophy is more firmly rooted in education than behaviorism. The idea that behavior can be controlled by rewards and punishment is so embedded in the day-to-day practices of school, one

rarely even notices it (Kohn, 1999). Discipline, grades, attendance policies, honor rolls, and even the way teachers use praise and disapproval—all reflect this philosophy that behavior can be controlled by external stimuli. So it's no surprise that teachers believe rewards and punishments are the way to *make* students do homework. When punishments don't work, teachers often increase the punishment, as if more of the same will accomplish the goal.

If we believe that good students do their homework and lazy students don't, then it becomes morally defensible to give failing grades for incomplete homework, thereby punishing the vice of laziness and rewarding the virtue of hard work. Behaviorism is most evident in the use of late policies and zeros for uncompleted homework (more about that in Chapter 4).

The moralistic, puritanistic, and behavioristic foundations are so firmly entrenched in homework culture, traditional homework practices may be accepted without question by both teachers and parents, as if a sort of brainwashing has occurred. To use a 1970s metaphor, "if you drank the Kool-Aid," you may not realize how the cult affects your attitudes about homework.

Forces Driving the Current Pro-Homework/ Anti-Homework Debate

Homework beliefs and their historical influences affect the debate today in insidious ways. The arguments today are strongly reminiscent of the earlier arguments for and against homework, yet something is different. This time around we face new and unique challenges.

No Child Left Behind

Never before have we lived with the specter of No Child Left Behind and the accountability it demands. The pressure to meet standards has never been more intense, and homework is seen as a tool for meeting those standards. The pressure has changed

education even at the kindergarten and 1st grade levels. A *Newsweek* cover story called it the “new first grade”:

In the last decade, the earliest years of schooling have become less like a trip to “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” and more like SAT prep. Thirty years ago first grade was for learning how to read. Now, reading lessons start in kindergarten and kids who don’t crack the code by the middle of the first grade get extra help. (Tyre, 2006, p. 36)

Many parents complain that homework is now routinely assigned in kindergarten and 1st grade. YouTube hosts a now famous 911 call from a 4-year-old preschooler who needed help with his “take-away” math homework. In the desperation to meet standards, even recess has been affected. One survey indicated that only 70 percent of kindergarten classrooms had a recess period (Pellegrini, 2005).

Media and Technology

Media and technology have broadened the homework debate to be more inclusive than in the past; more people are participating in the conversation. The Internet has given the public more information, served as a forum for many pro-homework and anti-homework blogs, and given us a window to similar debates in other countries. Today the homework debate is played out on iVillage and other parenting Web sites, as well as on radio and television and in the print media. Web sites such as www.stophomework.com (Bennett & Kalish, 2006) have united parents and given them strategies for protesting homework policies in their child’s school. Technology has reduced the isolation of parents; their private homework struggles can now be vented in public with the click of a mouse.

Just as 100 years ago the *Ladies’ Home Journal* writings sparked a movement, over the last decade the media have been a friend of homework reform. Since the release of Cooper’s 1998 comprehensive study, major news magazines and talk shows have conducted

a national dialogue about homework and have brought increased attention to the anti-homework movement. With a seemingly endless supply of television talk shows, quasi-news shows (such as *Dateline*), and round-the-clock cable news coverage, issues affecting families—including homework—have received more coverage. The availability of online media has allowed us to access that homework story on *Today* or that homework article in the *New York Times* long after publication, and without leaving our homes. Media and technology have helped to accelerate the growth of the anti-homework movement.

But the media has also been an enemy of the anti-homework movement. Every year, around back-to-school time, the media buries us with books, magazine articles, and television segments that reinforce a blind acceptance of homework as a good thing, endorsing the importance of homework and offering parents the same stale tips for getting children to do homework “without tears.” Throughout the school year, stories appear frequently about how to get your son or daughter into the Ivy League, how to ace the SATs, or how to help your child write a killer college essay.

The New Mass Hysteria

All this press fuels a mass hysteria among parents about their child’s ability to compete and to be successful. An American Academy of Pediatrics report labeled the trend “the professionalization of parenthood”:

Parents receive messages from a variety of sources stating that good parents actively build every skill and aptitude their child might need from the earliest ages. . . . They hear other parents in the neighborhood talk about their overburdened schedules and recognize it is the culture and even expectation of parents. (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 185)

The new mass hysteria has parents driven by fear. It’s a dog-eat-dog world, and the competition is tough. If you’re not careful, you

won't survive. It's a high-stakes game, with your child's future on the line. For many parents, the mantra has become "do whatever it takes" to get their child accepted at the best college—all of this with a tacit acceptance of the premise that admission into Harvard equals a high-paying career, which equals happiness. As one high school student put it:

People don't go to school to learn. They go to get good grades, which brings them to college, which brings them the high-paying job, which brings them happiness, so they think. (Pope, 2001, p. 4)

And as the superintendent in one wealthy district sardonically stated, "Our parents believe there are three career paths for their children: doctor, lawyer, and unsuccessful."

There seems to be little discussion that, in fact, this could be a faulty hypothesis, and only recently have some experts advised parents to question whether the Ivy League is right for *their* child. Three faulty assumptions actually feed this trend: (1) the Ivy League is the only route to success; (2) advanced placement (AP) classes are essential to get there; and (3) excessive homework is an inevitable part of AP or honors classes.

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AP Haley

Talking with other parents at a neighborhood get-together, Haley's mom is worried. Even though Haley is a good student—taking three AP classes, active in cheerleading and other activities—her mom is worried that she is not in the top 10 percent of her class. "She's only in the top 15 percent—she can't get into the University of Texas unless she's in the top 10 percent." Her mom wishes kids today weren't so competitive and claims her daughter wants to take three AP classes. She claims she's not pushing her daughter and doesn't even realize

how clearly her anxiety about the future is communicated and how readily her daughter picks it up. Mom goes on to remind the others, “Look at the jobs John’s kids got when they graduated from Peabody and Georgetown—all the money they are making!”

The stress is cultural—absorbed by parents and then fed to their children, creating a hypercompetitive attitude for both parents and children:

Parents receive the message that if their children are not well prepared, well balanced, and high achieving, they will not get a desired spot in higher education. Even parents who wish to take a lower-key approach to child rearing fear slowing down when they perceive everyone else is on the fast track. (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 185)

This trend has led many parents to have a somewhat schizophrenic attitude toward homework. They complain about the stress homework brings to children, the battles over the dinner table, and the disruption to family life, yet at the same time they are worried about their child’s ability to compete for entry into the best colleges. Although never proven by research, parents assume an automatic relationship between homework and future success. They have bought into the cult of beliefs about homework and accepted a connection between hours of homework and acceptance to an elite college. (Unfortunately, the manner in which many AP courses are taught reinforces this belief.) They wrongly assume that if it takes hours of homework in high school to guarantee admission to college, so be it.

One result of the mass hysteria has been a virtual explosion of the tutoring industry, now a \$6 billion business (Bennett & Kalish, 2006). Some parents use tutoring to give their college-bound children a leg up. But more often, for parents who can afford it, the

answer to the stressful and time-consuming job of supervising homework has been to “subcontract” the job to a tutor.

One of the potential negative effects of the tutoring craze has been the possibility that mass tutoring may “raise the bar” for homework assignments. After all, if most students are getting adult help with homework, it gives teachers the misperception that the students know more than they really do. It makes it appear that students are ready for more challenging assignments.

The candy factory episode of the classic *I Love Lucy* sitcom comes to mind. Lucy and Ethel are hired to work on an assembly line wrapping chocolates that pass by them on a conveyor belt. Struggling to keep up with the pace, they begin taking chocolates off the conveyor and stuffing them in their mouths and their hats. When the supervisor comes to check on their progress, they appear to be keeping up, so she yells to the back, “Speed it up!” Mass tutoring has the same potential to affect the difficulty of homework assignments in wealthy communities while widening the gap between those wealthy students and disadvantaged students whose families can’t afford tutors.

The Balance Movement

At the same time that some parents are mired in the mass hysteria, a backlash is occurring. Other parents are backing up and slowing down, seeking a balance in their children’s lives. Although some are recommending that homework be abolished, many more are suggesting that excessive homework is interfering with family life and not worth the loss of a carefree childhood. The movement is less an anti-homework movement than an anti-excessive homework movement, based on the idea that children should not have longer than an eight-hour workday (Vatterott, 2003). As a reaction against the mass hysteria movement, these parents have decided they are unwilling to mortgage their son’s or daughter’s childhood for the nebulous promise of future success. Nearly 30 years ago, David Elkind warned about *The Hurried Child* (1981)—a trend to

push children too hard, to overstructure their time, and to burden them with too many adult responsibilities. Today's balance movement echoes that concern, and it is continuing to gain support among teachers, other professionals, and the general public.

In 2007, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a report indicating the importance of undirected playtime for children (Ginsburg, 2007). The report addressed the tendencies of parents to overschedule and “build résumés” for children, and the negative ramifications of such actions. The report stated that play not only enhances social and emotional development but also helps to maintain parent-child bonds. It also recommended that pediatricians encourage active play and discourage parents from the overuse of passive entertainment for children (such as television and computer games). Some parents have already heeded this advice. With the ability of children to be connected and stimulated 24/7, some parents are now beginning to limit screen time and force kids to take “media fasts.” A worldwide Slow Movement, for both children and adults, is catching on and is documented in the book *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed* (Honore, 2004). The London-based author claims that the Slow Movement can help people live happier, healthier, and more productive lives by slowing down their pace.

Parents who feel strongly about the need for balance are concerned about both immediate and long-term effects of homework engulfing their children's free time. The immediate effects are simple—loss of leisure time, stress, and overall health.

Loss of leisure time. Parents often remark that, because of excessive homework, children are “losing their childhood” and “don't have time to be kids.” They point to the need for fresh air, unstructured playtime, family time, and downtime. Their concerns are supported by recent brain research showing the importance of downtime and rest for peak learning efficiency (Jensen, 2000).

Stress. The stress levels of school-age children are another concern. “This hurried lifestyle is a source of stress and anxiety

and may even contribute to depression” (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 185). While some are recommending children’s yoga and meditation as a way to cope with stress, others are targeting the sources of stress, and homework is a major culprit. Pediatricians and counselors report many stress-related symptoms, such as stomachaches and headaches, related to children’s anxiety over their inability to complete homework. In an acknowledgment of the stress experienced by high school students, Stanford University now sponsors a program called Challenge Success (formerly called Stressed Out Students [SOS]) that works with school teams composed of the principal, students, parents, counselors, and teachers or other adults (Pope, 2005). The program helps schools implement school-level strategies known to improve students’ mental and physical health and engagement in school.

Overall health. And finally, parents are concerned about the effect of excessive homework on the overall physical and psychological health of children. The traditional practice of assigning homework in every subject every night and the antiquated reliance on textbooks as curriculum have led to a physical problem. The weight of the backpack has been a subject of concern for some time, with an increasing number of students complaining of back pain (Galley, 2001). The American Chiropractic Association, the American Physical Therapy Association, and the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons all recommend that the weight of backpacks not exceed 15 percent of the child’s body weight (Moore, White, & Moore, 2007). Yet in one study of students in grades 5 to 8, more than half the students interviewed said they regularly carried backpack loads that were heavier than 15 percent of their body weight, and roughly one-third of the students interviewed had a history of back pain (Galley, 2001). Research done more recently now supports the recommendation that 10 percent of body weight be the cutoff for safe use of backpacks at all grade levels. The problem has doctors so concerned that, beginning in 2005, the American Occupational Therapy Association

has sponsored a National School Backpack Awareness Day each September. Researchers recommend that schools review homework policies to reduce the necessity of carrying textbooks home (Moore et al., 2007).

Many children sacrifice fresh air, exercise, or sleep to toil over hours of homework. Recent alarming news about the level of childhood obesity, the negative effects of sleep deprivation, and the established connection between sleep deprivation and obesity add strong arguments to the move to reduce homework to allow for more exercise and sleep. One child advocacy expert has compiled cutting-edge research showing that direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy physical, emotional, and spiritual development. He warns that today's overworked and overscheduled children can suffer from what he calls *nature deficit disorder*, resulting in obesity, depression, and attention deficit disorder (Louv, 2005).

Love of learning. In addition to these short-term effects, parents are also concerned about homework's long-term effect on children. In educational circles, discussion almost exclusively focuses on short-term achievement or passing the test, not on what the practice of homework does to a child's long-term learning, attitude about learning, or attitudes about the intellectual life. But parents are worried about the potential of excessive homework to dampen their child's natural curiosity, passion, and love of learning. Their concern, as stated by Alfie Kohn, is that homework may be "the single most reliable extinguisher of the flame of curiosity" (2006, p. 17).

Summing Up

Historically, the homework debate has continued to repeat itself. But the flawed belief system that homework is grounded on has yet to be adequately challenged. What complicates today's debate is the diversity of attitudes about the value of homework. The

mass hysteria and balance movements illustrate the breadth of those attitudes. The pendulum is swinging both ways at the same time. As a country, the United States is so diverse economically, culturally, and in parenting styles, it is not surprising that not all would agree on a practice that bridges both school and family life. This diversity of attitudes requires not only a critical examination of homework practices but also a rethinking of the school-family relationship. This topic is discussed in Chapter 2.

2

Homework in the Context of the New Family

Homework occurs within the context of both school and family, but the traditional practices of homework may be out of sync with the needs of today's families. The incredible diversity among families presents many challenges to the successful implementation of homework. Families are more economically and culturally diverse than in the past, and family composition is more varied than ever before, with divorced parents and blended families increasingly common, and with more grandparents than ever raising their grandchildren. Today's families exhibit a variety of parenting styles and values, some of which may be mismatched with the values of teachers and schools.

In previous generations, mainstream America seemed to agree about issues like honesty, respecting authority, obeying the law, premarital sex, and child rearing. Children received similar messages about right and wrong from their school, church, home, and neighborhood. If it takes a village to raise a child, in previous generations the village *was* raising the child. Adults seemed to agree about what was best for children. In some communities today, those shared values still exist, but in other communities that consistency of message is sorely lacking (Taffel, 2001).

The 1960s “do your own thing” generation marked the beginning of a diversity of family and societal values that continues to widen. As our society grows more diverse, students and parents may no longer receive the same messages from their family, church, community, and school. Parents value their individuality and freedom to set their own standards about child rearing. The result is that today there is little standardization among parents about child rearing (Tell, 2000). A broad diversity of opinions exists about such things as whether children should attend church, be paid for chores, or have curfews. Mainstream America cannot agree on whether children should be spanked, what clothing is too sexy for adolescent girls, or how much supervision children should have (Vatterott, 2007). On almost any given parenting topic, it is difficult for a group of parents to reach consensus. Regardless of how similar parents in a school appear to be, it is unlikely that all will have the same opinions about parenting or how homework should be handled.

Economic diversity, cultural diversity, and different parenting styles and family values converge to have an effect on homework, creating differing views of the parent-school relationship and differing attitudes about homework. A diversity in family values makes it even more likely that those values will clash with the values of individual teachers. Can we teach without judging the values of our students’ families? It is important for educators to understand the complexity of today’s families and to respect individual family values when implementing homework as an instructional practice.

Diversity of Parenting Styles

The evolution of democracy, in the United States and around the world, has profoundly affected families. Children, once viewed as powerless, are gaining legal rights and protections once reserved only for adults (Vatterott, 2007). This shift has influenced power

relationships within families; traditional power relationships have given way to more democratic, egalitarian relationships between parents and children.

This generation of children is the most democratically raised in U.S. history—protected by law against abuse and neglect and often allowed to make decisions at an early age about what they eat and wear, and what toys their parents buy. As U.S. culture has become more democratic, a diversity of power relationships has emerged among families. A significant change in parenting style that affects homework has been the trend away from authoritative parenting and toward more democratic families. One might call it “the death of the dictatorship” in parenting.

Parenting a dictatorship? To understand the analogy, one need only listen to adults who grew up in the 1950s talk about their childhood. Many of them will remark that “children didn’t have rights” in that day. Children did what they were told, ate whatever food was put in front of them, and wore the clothes their parents picked out for them. They did their homework because they were told to. The parent-child relationship was definitely top-down, and children were relatively powerless. This traditional power structure still exists in some families and in some cultures today, but it is not as prevalent as it once was. When teachers say, “Why can’t the parents just *make* their children do their homework?” they may be visualizing a dictatorial style of parenting that no longer exists in those families.

In many families, parental control of children has become less absolute. Many parents today have vowed not to be the dictators their parents were. They have allowed their children to have input into decisions, and they have often negotiated compromises with their children. More traditional parents (and more traditional teachers) will claim *that* is the problem with homework—that children have been given the impression that everything is negotiable and that parents have allowed children to be in charge. In a few families, parents may have lost a clear sense of their authority, and children may have learned how to be in control. But in most

families, parents are firmly in charge even though children have input into decisions.

How does parenting style affect homework? Rather than controlling all aspects of their child's life, parents who are not dictators are much more likely to choose their battles. Unfortunately, homework has become a big battle in many families. One study indicated that half of the parents surveyed had a serious argument with their child about homework over the last year (Kohn, 2006). Many parents are tired of the tension, the teary battles at the kitchen table, and the nagging they have to do to get the homework completed. They do not want to be the teacher's enforcer, the "homework cop" (Bennett & Kalish, 2006). Frustrated by their inability to force their children to do boring tasks or to continue to work when they are tired, many parents have decided that homework is not a battle they want to fight. When asked what she thought about problems with homework, one family counselor said, "The problem with homework is that parents are wimps" (meaning that they are no longer dictators). Maybe parents are not wimps; maybe they are smarter than we give them credit for. Maybe they realize the lack of value of some homework tasks, and maybe they know their children well enough to know when they need downtime.

Diversity of Beliefs About the Place of Academic Work in Life

Parents also differ in their beliefs about the place of academic work in a balanced life. Parents of all socioeconomic levels have a variety of opinions about the importance of homework in their child's daily life and what the balance should be between homework and other activities. Again, these beliefs may not be compatible with teacher beliefs.

All Academics, All the Time

Some parents believe that homework is the avenue through which all virtue flows. To them, academic life is the priority—as Corno

(1996) believes: “Homework is the job of childhood.” For children in the All Academics, All the Time families, homework totally defines a child’s free time. These parents believe homework is one way they can help their child get ahead and that it is the path to lifetime achievement (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). At a parent meeting in which school officials were discussing a new policy limiting homework, one parent asked, “Well, then, what would they do with their time?” Part of the rationale for All Academics, All the Time is the belief, discussed in Chapter 1, that intellectual activity is intrinsically more valuable than nonintellectual pursuits and that homework is better than television or video games. This attitude indicates a false sense of security that homework will somehow keep children out of trouble, away from vices like sex, alcohol, and drugs. The All Academics, All the Time mind-set lacks an understanding of the value of play, leisure pursuits, and downtime in a child’s physical, intellectual, and psychological development (Crain, 2003).

All Academics, All the Time parents often ask for extra homework for their child and become nervous when there is no homework to fill weekends and vacations. They seem to assume that as long as their kids have homework to do every night—never mind what it is—then learning must be taking place. Educational quality is assumed to be synonymous with rigor, and rigor, in turn, is thought to be reflected by the quantity and difficulty of assignments (Kohn, 2006, p. 20). If teachers have no suggestions for enrichment activities, these parents will often create homework for their children, making them study or review previous work.

Balancing Academics and Family-Chosen Activities

Another group of parents wishes to balance homework with other outside activities they and their child have chosen. These parents often claim they want their child to be well rounded, while some are also feeding the high school résumé to enhance their child’s college opportunities. Whatever the reason, many children are involved in numerous outside activities after school.

Teachers may feel entitled to counsel parents on the overscheduling of their child, but this is a slippery slope. It is certainly within our jurisdiction to recommend that students take fewer advanced placement classes (if we feel that taking those classes is contributing to homework overload), or to be concerned if students appear exhausted or overly stressed. But we must be careful that we truly have the best interest of the child in mind, rather than just wanting to see homework completed.

Parents have the right to control their child's time outside school. Parents frequently complain about students being forced to miss activities such as scout meetings or piano lessons because of excessive homework. Religious, cultural, or family traditions must also be respected. In some communities, homework is not assigned on Wednesday evenings because so many children attend church that evening. Many parents would like their children to attend an evening Bible study class one night a week. Catholic students who attend public school may take religion classes one evening a week in preparation for First Communion or Confirmation. In many cultures, Saturday or Sunday is designated as family day, when time spent with family takes priority over schoolwork. These examples offer just a few reasons to eliminate homework on weekends or during vacations.

Balancing Academics, Leisure, and Happiness

Many parents simply feel their children's lives are too busy and would like them to have more leisure time. "They just need time to play," "We just want them to be able to do nothing sometime," "It would be nice to have time to hang out with our kids and maybe watch a television show together," parents will say. They instinctively realize that their children's lives are too hectic, that their children are not relaxed or are not getting adequate sleep. One parent of a 6th grader in a gifted program complained that her daughter had two to three hours of homework a night. "The attitude of the teacher and administration seems to be that 'if she can't do the work maybe she doesn't belong here.' We are torn

between wanting the challenge of the program and concern for our daughter's overall well-being.”

Parents are also concerned about the stress that homework brings to children's daily routine. Some young children are exhausted after school and struggle to complete any homework at all. These are children who fairly recently were still taking naps in the afternoon (Kohn, 2006). Empathic parents and authors Bennett and Kalish (2006) provide a metaphor:

For many kids, homework is like having to do their taxes *every night*. How would we feel if we came home to hours of work from five different bosses? At least some of us would quit or enter therapy—which is where some of our children now find themselves. (p. 22)

Divorced parents and parents with unusual work schedules also have concerns. Many noncustodial divorced parents complain that they see their child only a few hours a week, and they don't want to spend that time fighting over homework. Parents who work evenings or do shift work may have only occasional blocks of time to spend with their child, and when they do, they want it to be relaxed, enjoyable time. Is it any wonder that for these families quality time takes precedence over homework?

The Priority of Family Responsibilities and Paid Work

For some children, especially those from low-income families, time after school is a precious resource for a family stretched thin. Those children's families may need them to babysit younger siblings, cook meals, do laundry, or clean. For families who own businesses or farms, children are a valuable part of the workforce. (How often do you see school-age children helping out in small family-owned restaurants?) In these situations, homework could actually be taking money out of the family's pocket. For example, at one Wisconsin middle school, a mandatory after-school program

required students to make up missing homework assignments. The program had prevented many students from failing and had been well received. However, one parent complained that the program had cost her \$210 that month for babysitting because her son was staying after school. This frustrated the administrator, who felt good that the boy was no longer failing. But to that parent, the financial priority was more critical than the incomplete homework. Again, family values sometimes conflict with the values of the school.

Even when the financial need is not dire, many families believe strongly in the value of paid work. As soon as their children are old enough to work, they expect them to start building an employment record. This is viewed as a legitimate method of teaching responsibility and money management, as well as preparation for a future life in the workforce. Whether students actually *need* to work is irrelevant to us as educators. It is the family value driving the decision that must be respected.

What does all this mean for homework? This diversity of family values, family priorities, and individual differences in students renders the one-size-fits-all homework plan virtually useless. Some parents will want more homework; some will want less. Some students will succeed with very full schedules, whereas others will thrive only when given adequate downtime to de-stress. This diversity of daily life after school also speaks volumes to the antiquated practice of assigning homework at 3:00 p.m. on Tuesday and expecting it back at 8:00 a.m. on Wednesday. Teachers need to accept that on certain evenings it will be impossible for some students to complete homework. Teachers must be careful not to focus so intensely on learning that they lose sight of the importance of family life. Teachers will need to remain flexible about family priorities and also learn more about their individual students' schedules outside school. Many teachers have replaced daily homework with monthly or weekly lists, or a course syllabus showing all homework assignments for the semester. This

approach allows more flexibility for the students and allows them to plan ahead for conflicts.

Diversity of Parental Involvement in Homework

Parents' involvement in the homework process can run the gamut from no involvement at all to regularly completing their children's homework for them. That involvement may differ due to the age of the student, the ability level of the student, the educational level of the parent, and the time the parent has available.

At one end of the continuum are parents who do not get involved at all with their child's homework. They don't ask if their child has homework, nor do they check to see if it is completed. They may care about their child's education but simply do not have the time, energy, or opportunity to be involved. Many parents are uninvolved because they have made a conscious decision to take a hands-off approach. Many have stopped being involved with homework because they are tired of the battle. They don't *want* the job, and they don't think it should *be* their job. As one parent said, "Teachers want us to do their job. Parents should not be expected to morph into tutors by night." Those parents feel it is the teacher's job to work with the student to ensure that homework is completed. Uninvolved parents will often say, "If it's supposed to help the child be responsible, why is it *my* job?" Many parents of high school students, in an effort to help their children be more independent, have stopped supervising homework. How do uninvolved parents feel about their lack of involvement? Some are quite comfortable, some are resentful that they are *expected* to be involved, and some feel guilty that they are being judged as bad parents.

On the other end of the continuum are the overinvolved parents, nicknamed "helicopter parents" because of their tendency to hover over their child's education, scrutinizing every move of the teacher and the student (Kantrowitz & Tyre, 2006). These are the parents who often micromanage homework and won't hesitate

to do homework for the child to ensure a good grade. Why do these parents micromanage? There could be several reasons: being fearful of the child's failing, overprotecting the child from unpleasantness, or saving the child from pain by not allowing the child to make mistakes. Punitive grading practices inadvertently encourage this overinvolvement from parents.

Many of these parental behaviors are self-imposed—you will often hear parents say, “I need to make sure the homework is right,” “I feel I must be involved,” “If I don't help them, they will fail,” and “I know I shouldn't do the work for them, but I just can't help myself.” Do these statements sound a little obsessive-compulsive? As any psychologist will tell you, this kind of behavior is often driven by the desire to reduce anxiety—in this case, parental anxiety spurred on by the mass hysteria about their children's future that was discussed in Chapter 1.

Unfortunately, this classic enabling behavior often does more harm than good. By micromanaging and taking responsibility for homework, these parents risk discouraging their children's self-reliance and may even rob the children of their own sense of accomplishment. Parents also send a message to their children that they don't trust them to do the work. The children quickly learn that if they act helpless, their parents will do the job for them. This may seem like protective and compassionate behavior on the part of parents, but it eventually backfires when children get to middle school and high school.

Some parents will say that it's necessary to be so involved, that homework has changed and become more complex (Bennett & Kalish, 2006). Is homework today really so different? If homework is so complex that students cannot complete it on their own, that is a problem that should be addressed with the teacher, not by doing the work for the child. But many parents seem unwilling or unable to discuss homework with teachers, afraid to question if the amount or difficulty of homework assignments is right for their child. They accept that this homework must be what needs to be done.

Economic Diversity Issues: The “Haves” and the “Have-Nots”

Economic diversity of families holds perhaps the greatest challenge as schools struggle to implement fair and equitable homework policies. There appears to be an ever-widening chasm between the rich and the poor (Zuckerman, 2006), which has major implications for education in general and homework in particular. One indication of this trend is that between 1995 and 2004, families headed by college graduates showed a 75.8 percent *increase* in net worth, whereas families headed by high school dropouts showed a *decrease* of 26.2 percent (Pethokoukis, 2006).

America is fast becoming a nation of haves and have-nots, with rising income inequality. Data from the Federal Reserve for 2001 to 2004 shows that median family income rose just 1.6 percent during that period, compared with 9.5 percent during 1998 to 2001. Income distribution from 1995 to 2004, during both an economic boom and a recession, kept tilting toward the already wealthy. The top income quartile gained 77 percent, while the bottom gained just 8 percent. (Pethokoukis, 2006, p. 43)

Socioeconomic status separates the haves from the have-nots in several concrete ways, all of which can affect learning. The works of Betty Hart and Todd Risley (1995) and Richard Rothstein (2004) document important gaps between the home environments of lower-class students and students from the middle or upper class. First, there is a *reading gap*—lower-class students may not have books in the home, are less likely to be read to in the home, and are less likely to see their parents reading for pleasure or reading to solve problems. Second, there is a *conversation gap*—professional parents speak more than twice as many words per hour to their children than do welfare parents. By the age of 3, children of professional parents have a vocabulary twice as large as that of welfare children (Hart & Risley, 1995). And third, there is

a *health and housing gap*—lower-class students, in general, are in poorer health than middle- or upper-class students. As a result of poorer prenatal conditions, unhealthy environments, and lack of medical care, lower-class students are more likely to have vision problems, dental problems, and asthma. Because they often lack health insurance, they are more likely to miss school for minor health problems that go untreated, such as ear infections. All of these factors put lower-class children at a disadvantage, even before they enter school (Rothstein, 2004).

For children with special needs, class differences are especially important because they often influence the amount and quality of learning assistance these children receive. Consider the following examples of Sydney and Dillon, two 3rd grade boys with learning disabilities.

Sydney is from a lower-class family. His parents are both high school dropouts and understand little about the concept of learning disabilities. They know Sydney has always struggled in school, but they have trouble taking time off from their jobs to talk to the teacher. They feel uncomfortable talking to people at the school and do not know it is possible for Sydney to be tested for a learning disability or to receive special help. They cannot afford to send Sydney to a tutor. Sydney lags far behind the other 3rd graders in reading and math.

Dillon also has a learning disability, but his story is much different. His parents are wealthy and highly educated. Before kindergarten, they participated in a school-sponsored parenting program, which taught them how to enhance Dillon's cognitive development. When he performed poorly on the kindergarten screening, they paid to have a comprehensive assessment done through a child development center at a local hospital. Dillon's parents had him tested by the school in kindergarten, advocated for special placement with the best teachers, and closely monitored his progress. Dillon and his parents regularly see a family counselor, and Dillon gets weekly help from a tutor. As a

result, in the 3rd grade Dillon is close to grade level in reading and math.

As the stories illustrate, class differences can easily create disadvantages at school for lower-class children. Unfortunately, homework has the potential to exacerbate class differences and widen the achievement gap. Kralovec and Buell (2000) describe the problem succinctly: “Homework appears to further disadvantage the already disadvantaged” (p. 70). In the worst-case scenario, homework helps the privileged succeed academically, and homework causes the less privileged to fail academically. Sadly, Kralovec and Buell (2000) found that the inability to keep up with homework was a critical factor in the decision of lower-class students to drop out of school. Consider the lives of the following three high school students—Emma, Ashley, and Maria—and how their families’ economic situations affect their ability to complete homework.

Even when Emma has several hours of homework, she always completes it. Her parents take pride in how hard she works, convinced that rigorous homework will prepare Emma for an Ivy League education. Emma’s parents both have advanced degrees, and they often have intellectual discussions with Emma about the subjects she is studying. They have an extensive home library, Internet access, and plenty of money to hire tutors and purchase materials for homework projects. Emma has her own computer. In her pursuit of the perfect grade point average, Emma has learned how to cut corners and even cheat when necessary, and how to do without sleep and a social life in order to be a successful student (Pope, 2001).

Ashley usually does her homework. Although her parents are not highly educated, they value education, and it is important to them that Ashley do well in school. Both her parents work long hours, and their free time is often consumed with household chores. Though their schedules seem overwhelming, Ashley’s parents usually find time to monitor her homework but often do not understand the content. Sometimes they drive her to the store

for homework materials. The family has one computer that several people must share. Ashley's parents usually check to make sure Ashley has done her homework.

Maria often does not do her homework. She comes home immediately after school three days a week to care for her younger siblings so her single mother can go to work. The other two days, Maria works part-time after school to supplement her mother's paycheck. Even when she has time, circumstances make it difficult for her to complete homework. There is no quiet place in the house to study, and there is no computer. Maria's mother has only a 6th grade education and does not speak English very well, so it is hard for her to help Maria with homework. The family budget has no money for materials for homework projects. Even if money were available, the family has no car for the trip to the store. It is not safe to walk to the public library.

Obviously these scenarios do not represent all students—not all upper-class students are like Emma and Dillon, and not all lower-class students are like Sydney and Maria. Although differences in homework completion exist among students regardless of social class, the scenarios illustrate the discrepancy in the homework experience that *can* occur across social classes. For poor families, homework may be a low priority compared to survival (Payne, 2001). If those parents feel that school has not benefited them in their lives, they may see homework as a waste of time in view of the more essential needs of preparing meals, caring for younger children, and working to provide money for the family.

As illustrated in the stories related here, lower-class students are likely to have more obstacles to completing homework than middle- and upper-class students. Middle- and upper-class parents are more likely than lower-class parents to help with homework (Rothstein, 2004). When lower-class children are unable to complete homework because of family or economic conditions, teachers run the risk of unfairly punishing those children for factors beyond their control. Homework is most unfair when teachers fail

to realize the limitations of the homework environment for lower-class students (Payne, 2008).

What if the way teachers use homework worsened the achievement gap between rich and poor students? Would that fact cause us to consider homework's use more carefully? When creating homework tasks, teachers should guard against assumptions about a child's home environment (Payne, 2008). When assigning homework, the following advice should be followed:

- Do not assume the child has a quiet place to do homework.
- Do not assume the child has a parent home in the evening.
- Do not assume the child's parents speak and read English.
- Do not assume the family has money for school supplies.
- Do not assume the child has access to materials such as paper, a pencil sharpener, scissors, glue, magazines, or a calculator.
- Do not assume the child has access to a computer or the Internet.

Teachers must remember that, regardless of social class, parents love their children and want the best for them. But most parents are not teachers, so they don't necessarily value homework in the same way that most teachers do. In discussing the fact that some families cannot afford supplies for homework projects, one teacher remarked, "They don't have money for posterboard, but they have money to buy \$150 sneakers." That choice is not our call. How families choose to spend their money is a reflection of family values that may differ from our values. It is not our place to judge families based on *our* values.

If families cannot afford homework supplies, those supplies should be provided by the school. If money is not available in the school budget, funding should be pursued through the district, state grants, the PTA, local businesses, service organizations, or private donations from more fortunate parents (Huguelet, 2007). In the United States, a free public education is a right for all children. If we are public school educators, the assumption is that

education is free, and children should not be required to purchase supplies for homework projects.

The Changing Parent-School Relationship

This discussion about values brings us to an important but delicate discussion about the parent-school relationship. As families have changed and become more democratic, their relationship with the school has changed as well.

To understand where we are, we must first reflect on where we have been. In previous generations, society was more authoritarian, and people were usually respectful of that authority. Workers usually obeyed their bosses, wives submitted to the authority of their husbands, and children submitted to the absolute authority of parents. Children were taught to address adults in their world as “sir” and “ma’am,” and it was commonly accepted that children should respect their elders.

Schools, representing a sanctioned societal organization, maintained the status quo with absolute authority over children. Mothers were the primary contact for the school and, as women, were accustomed to being subservient to authority. In the authority hierarchy, teachers ruled over students and parents seldom questioned the authority of the school. Most parents endorsed the school’s rules and accepted the judgment of teachers and principals. As many adults raised in the ’50s and ’60s remember, if you were in trouble at school, you were in trouble at home. Parents were a silent partner with the school, rarely entering into the decision-making process. When teachers asked for parental involvement, what they really meant was they wanted parents to help them reach the academic goals that they, as the educational experts, had deemed important. (Veteran teachers sometimes refer to these times as “the good old days.”)

Parents assumed the school knew best. When children were assigned homework, parents dutifully obliged schools by making sure homework was done. For the many mothers who didn’t work

outside the home, taking responsibility for homework was less of a hardship than it is for many working parents today. Parents were willing partners in the homework practice. Although that scenario may still exist in some schools today, in many communities the relationship looks much different.

The Erosion of the Absolute Authority of the School

At some point in recent history, things began to change. As U.S. culture evolved to become a more democratic and more educated society, the parent's view of the absolute authority of the school began to change. Adults became less trustful of authority and, in general, less subservient to the authority of the school. Whereas in the past, parents had trusted that the school knew best, parents began to believe *they* knew something about education too. Teachers were no longer the only educational experts in the room. Teachers began to complain that "everyone's an expert on education just because they went to school." Many parents felt not only that school decisions *could be* challenged, but also that they *should be* challenged. Parents began to voice opinions about many decisions being made in the school—about discipline, schedules, vacations, dress codes, and the like. Noticing this change in parents caused one seasoned principal to say, "I prefer not to have parental involvement—it's more trouble than it's worth."

And so began the demise of the absolute authority of the school. Mirroring the death of the dictatorship in families discussed earlier, the school dictatorship began to die too. Many parents no longer viewed themselves as partners with teachers in the job of educating their child. They began to view themselves as clients for a service to be delivered. Instead of believing that they owed the school support, many parents began to feel that the school owed them a service. Coupled with this belief was the concept of parental freedom—that parents have the right to raise their children as they see fit.

A conspicuous example of this change in attitude is how parents today plan family vacations. Years ago, most parents would

never have pulled their children out of school for a family trip, respecting the school's schedule and its strong discouragement of extended absences. Yet a 2006 survey showed that 61 percent of parents said they would take their children out of school for a family vacation, up from 45 percent in 2000 (Oyola, 2006). Many parents today believe they are entitled to remove their children from school for events *they* believe to be important, much to the chagrin of teachers and administrators. As one school principal acquiesced, "We have *so* lost that battle."

If this picture of parental support seems bleak, it is meant to be. It is meant to shock us into a reality check. Do all parents today feel that way about school? Of course not. But it is important to understand the perspective of those parents and to realize that the disconnect between the school's view and parents' views can be a major problem. We must be self-critical as educators and acknowledge that, in many schools, our relationship with parents has never been a partnership. Two moms expressed it this way:

Few parents would call what we have with our kids' schools a "partnership" when we rarely have a say about our "part" or whether we want to turn our homes into second classrooms at night. Yet many of us feel we don't have a choice. (Bennett & Kallish, 2006, p. 58)

When teachers and principals complain that parents are no longer supportive of the school and teachers, they may be living in the past—when being *supportive* parents meant doing exactly what the teacher wanted, no questions asked. Those teachers and principals have failed to realize that a fundamental paradigm shift is occurring in the power relationship between parents and schools.

Respecting the Separate Power Structures of Home and School

Schools and families have always maintained separate power structures. For the most part, schools did not tell families how to raise their children, and parents did not tell schools how to teach their

students. Parents maintained power over their children in the family, and teachers maintained power over children when they were at school. The school was expected to act *in loco parentis*, in place of the parent. Parents, in that sense, relinquished control of their children during the school day, when teachers acted in their place.

Schools have extended their reach into the family power structure in only a few areas, serving as an agent of the state to protect the best interest of the child. For instance, schools intervene to ensure that students attend school regularly and have had their immunizations. Schools are required by law to report abuse and neglect. Schools can prohibit sick children from attending school and can remove students who are a danger to others. But recently, when some schools began sending letters home to parents indicating their children were overweight, parents quickly protested that the school had unreasonably crossed the boundary between school and parental power structures. Increasing numbers of parents now believe homework has crossed that boundary as well (Bennett & Kallish, 2006; Kohn, 2006). Homework has become a contentious battleground in the fragile relationship between parents and school. As Goldberg (2007) puts it:

Homework is an anomaly that transverses the boundary between family and school. It is a standard created at school for behavior to take place in the home. There is no other area in a child's life where an authority outside the parent has so much influence on policies and practices at home. . . . School . . . is mandatory, and homework has become an assumed extension of that legal mandate. (p. 4)

Goldberg goes on to explain that when homework works, parents aren't on the school's organizational chart at all. It's only when students fail to complete homework that the problem gets sticky, usually with lots of blaming on both sides. Consider if the following fable reflects any teacher or parent attitudes evident in your school.

• • •

A Fable

In EverySchool USA, as teachers began to assign more and more homework, they began to notice an erosion of parental support. Parents were no longer compliant about the homework teachers assigned. Parents now had their own agenda about what activities should fill their children's time outside of school. Parents were not sure homework should usurp their child's piano lessons, religion school, French lessons, or sports. Parents began writing notes asking that their child be excused from certain homework assignments. Along with an increasing diversity in parenting styles came an increasing diversity in the plans that parents had for their children's time outside school.

While parents felt entitled to control their child's free time, some teachers felt the parents were being downright uncooperative. "Shouldn't parents always support the school?" teachers asked. The teachers believed it was their obligation to extend learning beyond the classroom and that students and parents should comply. After all, they were only doing their job.

The principal and the teachers were still operating under the belief that they were totally in charge of the child's academic life. They believed they had the right to control the child's life outside of school for academic purposes. They were so sure of that right, they decided that parents were simply unaware of their parental responsibility and needed to be informed. So the teachers and the principal met and decided the way to fix the problem was to add a category on the student's report card that gave parents a "grade" for school support.

Well, that worked all right! The school support "grade" became the catalyst for a full-blown public relations disaster. Within a few days, parents were storming the office and tying up the phones with complaints. The local media got wind of the conflict, and the

newspaper published an article with the headline “The Homework Blame Game at EverySchool.” The principal learned the hard way about the disconnect between the teachers’ and parents’ beliefs. He learned the hard way that times had changed.

Renegotiating the Parent-School Relationship

The fable rings true in many ways. Some schools *are* out of touch with the needs of parents. Some parents *are* demanding more control over their child’s homework schedule, and, yes, some schools *are* issuing report cards that give parents feedback on their “school support” (Jones, 2001). These may not be issues in your school. If parents are graciously compliant about homework and children dutifully complete homework with no negative effects, perhaps your school has no problem. But for those parents who have concerns, it will be necessary for teachers and principals to revise their expectations and renegotiate the relationship between school and parent. If the fable sounded familiar, it may be time to examine the parent-school relationship in your school.

Renegotiating the relationship will require teachers to compromise, respect parents’ wishes, and relax a bit. One of our biggest handicaps as educators is our own anxiety about poor student performance and the belief that homework will save poorly performing students. Forging a true partnership for homework will require some hard work and some tough thinking. The following steps are a good start.

- 1. Get real.** Homework critics bluntly state that schools should not be dictating what children do with their evenings (Kohn, 2006). Principals and teachers must accept that they are not totally in charge of a child’s free time and that they do not have the right to demand that parents be involved with and support

homework. That does not mean they must give up on homework completely—it just means they must be willing to compromise and respect the wishes of parents to control their child’s time outside school.

2. Resist the temptation to judge. As teachers, it is easy to feel powerless when we need help, can’t control parents, and feel overwhelmed. If we are teaching in a school with few resources, it is particularly frustrating. That frustration makes it tempting for teachers to judge—it’s easy to blame both the parents and the student when homework is not completed. One teacher who was raised in poverty complained, “I did it. I was poor, but I knew it was my responsibility to do the homework, so I did it. If I did it, they can too.” Perhaps she had supportive parents who strongly valued education, and perhaps she was blessed with drive and perseverance. Regardless of our own upbringing, this tendency to judge families from the perspective of the way *we* were raised is damaging to the parent-school relationship.

Sometimes it’s easier to judge children as unmotivated or lazy than to reflect on our own teaching methods or to admit we don’t have the tools, experience, or training to meet individual students’ needs. But judging, blaming, and whining solve nothing. Teachers must accept the limitations of parental involvement and find ways to work with the support they have.

3. Revise expectations of parental support. A recent AP-AOL poll indicated a disparity between teacher and parent views of homework help. When parents were asked, “Thinking about the amount of time you spend helping your child with homework, do you feel it is usually too much, about right, or too little?” 57 percent of parents thought they were spending about the right amount of time. However, when teachers were asked, “In general, how would you rate the amount of time most parents spend helping their children with homework?” only 8 percent of teachers answered “about the right amount of time” and 87 percent of teachers answered “not enough time” (www.eschoolnews, 2006). This discrepancy

might lead one to offer the following advice to teachers: When all else fails, lower your expectations!

What are reasonable expectations? Chapters 3 and 4 will discuss the specific types of tasks that are best for homework, but suffice it to say here that homework should not be used for new learning (Jackson, 2009). Parents should not be expected to teach their child a new skill. If the child has been given an assignment but has not yet acquired the skill, then the homework is inappropriate (Margolis, 2005). One 2nd grade parent was told by the teacher, “If you don’t work with your daughter’s penmanship, I’m going to have to send her to occupational therapy.” When the parent asked at what point the child had failed to keep up with penmanship in class, the teacher responded, “We don’t teach penmanship” (Bennett & Kalish, 2006, p. 74). In that situation, the teacher was asking the parent to teach a specific part of the curriculum, which is not the parent’s role in homework.

Expectations are not demands. It is important to get parents’ feedback about how much they want to be involved and to respect the wishes of individual parents. Schools should not expect that all parents will be involved with homework—that is the parent’s choice.

4. Suggest (do not mandate) guidelines for the parent’s role in homework. Most parents are unclear about what their role in homework is supposed to be. They often get different messages from different teachers as to what and how much they are supposed to do. They need more guidance and more communication from the teacher about expectations, but they also want teachers to respect what they as parents are willing and able to do in the homework process.

Parents should be encouraged to be *less involved* with the child’s actual homework task and *more involved* in communicating with the teacher—writing notes when students don’t complete work, asking for adaptations, or documenting how much time the child spent on the task. Parents should be encouraged to be observers, not enforcers (Goldberg, 2007).

If the child cannot do the homework without help, parents should be directed to stop the child and write a note to the teacher. If doing homework with their child is causing stress or conflict, parents should be directed to stop helping (Margolis, 2005). Parents should inform the school if they believe their child's homework load is excessive.

It is logical to expect parents to be somewhat more involved at the elementary level, less involved at the middle school level, and rarely involved at the high school level. During middle school, parents should be encouraged to wean their child off their homework help. Parents can be instructed to tell their children, "It's time for me to quit helping you with your homework" or "Mom's not taking algebra this year" (Vatterott, 2005). At the middle and high school levels, parents should back off tasks such as correcting mistakes, proofreading, or reviewing for tests. By this age, students should be self-checking and working with classmates to study or peer-edit. Homework advice for 7th and 8th grade parents should be "Don't touch it, don't pack it." At the middle and high school levels, teachers should work with students directly to make sure homework is completed and turned in. This assumes, of course, that school strategies are in place to prevent the student from failing as a result of incomplete homework (see the discussion of homework support programs in Chapter 5).

As schools attempt to define the parent's role in homework, they must realize that they can only *recommend* what parents should do. Given the new relationship between parents and schools, it would seem counterproductive for schools to *mandate* parental involvement in homework. Schools should work with their building's parent-teacher organization to come up with suggestions that clarify the parent's role in the homework process.

When designing homework guidelines for parents, wording is important. The phrases *parent guidelines* or *parent options* suggest a voluntary process, that parents have choices in what they will or will not do in regard to homework. *Parent expectations*, however, indicates that teachers *expect* parents to do certain things, meaning

that if parents *don't* do those things, they—or their children—may be judged poorly. An example of suggested guidelines for the parent's role in homework is shown in Figure 2.1.

5. Establish formal methods of parent-teacher communication. A true partnership involves two-way communication that can be initiated by either party. Yet “researchers—and parents—report around 95 percent of school communication is one-way, with school officials telling parents what they or their children should be doing” (Jones, 2001, p. 21). Parents need guidance and specific tools to help them communicate with teachers about homework.

Figure 2.1	Suggested Guidelines for Parental Involvement in Homework
<p>Parents are encouraged to . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask their child about what the child is studying in school. Ask their child to show them any homework assignments. Assist their child in organizing homework materials. Help their child formulate a plan for completing homework. Provide an appropriate space for their child to do homework. <p>Parents may, if they wish . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help their child interpret assignment directions. Proofread their child's work, pointing out errors. Read aloud required reading to their child. Give practice quizzes to their child to help prepare for tests. Help their child brainstorm ideas for papers or projects. Praise their child for completing homework. <p>Parents should not . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attempt to teach their child concepts or skills the child is unfamiliar with. Complete assignments for their child. Allow their child to sacrifice sleep to complete homework. 	

A home schedule card (shown in Figure 2.2) allows parents or students to list their outside commitments. This can provide valuable information to teachers as they adapt assignments and deadlines to meet individual needs. A short parent survey such as the one shown in Figure 2.3 can help teachers understand parents' views about homework and their preferred level of involvement. (A longer version of the parent survey appears in the appendix.)

A parent feedback checklist (shown in Figure 2.4) can be used as a cover sheet for homework assignments. This checklist provides for two-way communication by allowing teachers to specify the amount of time a child should spend on an assignment and by giving parents options to check if the child is unable to finish

Figure 2.2		Home Schedule Card for Parents			
Child's name _____					
Grade level _____					
It would be helpful for your child's teacher to know how homework fits into your child's daily schedule. Please complete the homework card by writing down how your child typically spends time in the weekday hours when not in school (e.g., homework, sports practices, music lessons, visitation with noncustodial parents, dinner, sleep, play, TV, computer).					
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	
3:00–4:00 p.m.					
4:00–5:00 p.m.					
5:00–6:00 p.m.					
6:00–7:00 p.m.					
7:00–8:00 p.m.					
8:00–9:00 p.m.					
9:00–10:00 p.m.					
10:00–11:00 p.m.					

Figure 2.3 Short Homework Survey for Parents

1. What grade is your child in? _____ What do you feel is an appropriate amount of homework for your child's grade level per evening?

2. How do you feel about weekend homework and homework over holiday vacations?

3. Who is in charge of homework? (Check all that you agree with.)
 - It is the parent's responsibility to make sure the child does homework.
 - Homework is the child's responsibility; parents should not get involved.
 - Parents have the right to excuse their child from homework without penalty for any reason.
 - Parents have the right to excuse their child from homework without penalty if it interferes with the child's sleep, health, or emotional well-being.
 - Parents have the right to excuse their child from homework without penalty if it conflicts with outside activities or family activities.
4. How much control should parents have over the amount and type of homework their child has? (Check all that you agree with.)
 - Parents should be able to request a limit on the *amount* of homework.
 - Parents should be able to request a limit on the *time spent* on homework.
 - Parents should be able to request *modifications* in the difficulty of assignments.
 - Parents should be able to request *additional* homework for their child.
 - The amount and type of homework is up to the teacher.
5. How involved are you with your child's homework? (Check all that apply to you.)
 - I don't get involved in my child's homework.
 - I check to see that my child's homework is done.
 - I have corrected my child's mistakes on homework.
 - I explain things that my child doesn't understand.
 - I help my child study for tests.
 - I have completed homework for my child just to get it done.

(continued)

Figure 2.3	Short Homework Survey for Parents (Continued)
<p><input type="checkbox"/> I sometimes have trouble helping my child because I don't understand the directions.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I sometimes have trouble helping my child because I don't understand the material.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I'm not sure <i>how much</i> I should help my child with homework.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I have occasionally prohibited my child from doing homework because it interfered with sleep or family time.</p> <p>Other _____</p>	

Figure 2.4	Parent Feedback Checklist
<p>Dear Parent:</p> <p>I estimate your child can complete this assignment in _____ minutes.</p> <p>It is not necessary for your child to work longer than _____ minutes on this assignment, even if he or she does not finish it. Your child will not be penalized.</p> <p>How much time did your child spend on this assignment? _____</p> <p>If your child did not finish the assignment, please check the reason or reasons below:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> My child could no longer focus on the task.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> My child was too tired.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> My child did not understand the assignment.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> My child did not have the necessary materials to complete the assignment.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> My child did not have enough time because of other outside activities.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other reason (please explain). _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Parent signature _____</p>	

the assignment. A student version of the same checklist appears in Chapter 5.

6. Set parents' minds at ease about homework. An effective partnership also requires trust. Many parents have huge trust issues regarding teachers and homework, based on their past experience or the experiences of other parents. Some parents are afraid that talking to the teacher about homework will be ineffective or even harmful, which is understandable after hearing parent stories such as these:

I've tried talking to my son's teacher about how he struggles with homework, but whatever I end up talking to her about, she uses it against my son the very next day and embarrasses him publicly. (From the mother of a 5th grader)

At first I would write notes to the teacher telling her how my daughter wasn't able to finish because it was too much work. But my daughter would get benched at recess time. (From the mother of a 3rd grader)

A lot of anxiety has been created as such stories of teacher retribution are circulated among parents. Most teachers and administrators would be stunned by these stories, but unfortunately there are plenty of such stories to go around. Therefore, it is necessary for schools to establish ground rules so that parents feel comfortable talking to teachers about homework.

Again, school officials should work with parent groups to craft a schoolwide zero-tolerance policy stating that there will be no retribution, punishment, or embarrassment of students who do not complete homework. Also included in that policy should be a stipulation that students cannot be failed because of incomplete homework. (These ideas are discussed further in Chapter 4.)

7. Endorse a set of inalienable homework rights. As an additional sign of good faith, school leaders may wish to go one step further and adopt a set of homework rights for parents and children. Figure 2.5 is an example of a homework rights policy.

Figure 2.5	A Bill of Rights for Homework
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1. Children shall not be required to work more than 40 hours a week, when class time is added to homework time.
2. Children shall have the right to homework they can complete without help. If they cannot complete homework without help, children shall be entitled to reteaching or modified assignments.
3. A child's academic grade shall not be put in jeopardy because of incomplete homework. Children shall be entitled to an in-school or after-school homework support program if they are unwilling or unable to complete homework at home.
4. A child's right to playtime, downtime, and adequate sleep shall not be infringed upon by homework.
5. Parents shall be entitled to excuse their child from homework that the child does not understand or is too tired to finish.
6. Families shall be entitled to weekends and holidays free from homework.

Summing Up

Because parents today are from different social and economic classes and have a variety of parenting styles and beliefs about the value of homework, traditional practices related to homework must be reexamined in light of that diversity. The power relationship between schools and parents must be realigned to embrace parents as equal partners in their child's education. The role of parents in homework must be voluntary, respectful, and individualized, and the value of family life must be honored.