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Article Making Homework Work

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For students and educators participating in distance learning these days, it may be hard to distinguish homework assignments from any kind of school-assigned work that is done at home. In fact, between March and June 2020, "homework" varied considerably: Some schools assigned weekly packets of work to be completed at home in lieu of any online lessons, while other schools decided to eliminate "homework" altogether for students who participated in online lessons for several hours each day. Though we conducted the following research on homework prior to the pandemic, our findings offer implications for all kinds of assignments done at home—both during remote learning and once students return to classrooms.

In a student survey conducted over the last decade (from 2009 to 2020) by [Challenge Success](#), a nonprofit that I cofounded based on my research at Stanford University's Graduate School of Education, we asked over 200,000 middle and high school students from high-performing schools, "Right now in your life, what, if anything, causes you the most stress?" One of the most common responses was one word: "Homework." The cultural narrative about homework generally focuses on how much homework students are doing. It's treated as a Goldilocks problem: When is it too little? When is it too much? When is it just right? Having too much homework is certainly part of the problem when it comes to student stress levels. In fact, of the more than 50,000 high school students that Challenge Success surveyed from October 2018 to January 2020, [56 percent of students said they had too much homework](#). In that same sample, students reported doing an average of 2.7 hours of homework per weeknight and 3.0 hours on weekends.

However, the amount of homework alone doesn't tell the whole story. The type of homework students receive can also be a source of stress, our survey shows. For instance, when students perceive homework to be boring or repetitive, or if they feel it is too advanced or confusing, they are likely to be stressed, regardless of the amount of assigned work. In addition, students are often stressed about how well they do on their homework, particularly because homework completion and quality are usually factored into students' course grades.

Given the stress from homework that so many students report, we updated our previous homework white paper with an [extensive review of the current literature on homework](#) and its benefits. Based on this review, we found that the relationship between time spent on homework and academic achievement is nuanced and complex. In elementary school, there is very little, if any, evidence that time spent on homework in most subject areas has a positive effect on achievement. (A notable exception is reading for pleasure, which is associated with achievement. One 2013 study found that [the influence of reading for pleasure is powerful for children's cognitive development](#), especially in terms of vocabulary (Sullivan & Brown, 2013.)

In middle and high school, there is a slight positive relationship between time spent on homework and grades and test scores in the recent research. However, those benefits are complicated by various factors and limitations, including whether the homework was interesting to the students, how much effort they put into it, and the level of difficulty and purpose of the assignment. Furthermore, several studies found diminishing returns on the value of homework once a student exceeds a certain amount of time spent on it (Cooper, 1989, 2007).

To make homework work for students and educators, we recommend taking a close look at the quality and purpose of the assignments by asking five questions. These questions apply whether learning is happening primarily at school, at home, or a hybrid of the two.

1. **Do students understand the purpose and value of the assignment?** When students perceive homework as busy work, meaningless, or of little value to the teacher, they are less likely to complete it and may become less interested in learning and in school in general. Educators can increase engagement by clarifying the purpose of the work and allowing students to choose which problems to do or which topics to research. Teachers can also allow students to stop when they believe they understand the concept.
2. **Will all students be able to do the task independently?** It is challenging to design homework assignments that meet every child's academic and developmental needs, but students are more likely to disengage when an assignment feels either too hard or too easy. Teachers can use a variety of formative assessment strategies, such as student check-ins and daily exit tickets to strive for the "just-right" challenge for each student and ensure that homework can be done without help from parents or tutors—especially because not all students have the resources to get outside help.
3. **Is this assignment better done in class versus as homework?** Some activities can't be done effectively or efficiently in class or during synchronous online learning, such as reading a book chapter to prepare for class discussion or interviewing a community member for an oral history project. These tasks might be better to assign as homework or during asynchronous learning. Skill practice, such as learning when and how to apply algorithms in math or parsing difficult text passages, might be more effective during class, where teachers can clarify misunderstandings and provide feedback and coaching.
4. **How much time should this assignment take?** If you are going to assign homework, consider how much time the assignment should take and recommend an appropriate cut-off time for students without penalty. Suggested time limits should be based on the purpose of the assignment as well as student age and ability. Having students start the assignment in class or during synchronous learning will help you estimate how long it may take different students to do and if they need help. Remember that students may have homework from several classes each night, so try to coordinate large assignments and assessments with other teachers when possible and offer lenient late policies or "homework passes" when workload or home obligations are heavy.
5. **What kind of feedback should I provide on the homework?** Grading homework is tricky. Some students who don't turn it in or do it incorrectly may have organizational issues or other reasons beyond their control, and others may have relied on outside help to correct the work. If you do choose to grade the homework, make sure you provide actionable and timely feedback on assignments and offer students opportunities to revise and resubmit. Aim to return graded assignments prior to an upcoming assessment so students can learn from their mistakes, and make sure your comments are specific

enough for students to make corrections. For example, instead of just marking something as incorrect, add a comment asking a student to show their work, or explain that they need to add more supporting evidence to a paragraph to strengthen their claim.

As educators consider the changes they need to make to their curriculum and pedagogy this fall, particularly how to make up for lost learning over the spring and summer and how to prioritize essential skills and understandings, the questions above can help streamline assignments, increase student engagement, and alleviate some of the stress that so many students are experiencing right now.

To further explore the research mentioned above and to see more tips for designing effective homework, you can [download](#) the Challenge Success homework white paper.

References

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