

Student Performance Suffers When Homework Is Optional

Do Students Have Too Much Homework?, 2012

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The school district in Irving, Texas, stopped counting [homework](#) assignments as part of a student's grades beginning with the 2010-2011 school year. The results of this experiment proved interesting in the ongoing battles over the necessity and value of homework. After six weeks, over half of the high school [students](#) were failing a class—a much higher percentage than the previous year. Based on the data from Irving, [high school students](#) seem to lack the judgment and experience necessary to know on their own when additional studying or outside class work is needed in order to pass tests and complete projects. Just as sports teams understand that conditioning and drills before games are vital to success, maybe the practice homework affords is indeed a necessary part of mastering a subject.

We've been working hard at 21st Century Learning for a decade now. We're *setting new paradigms for learning* and "creating virtual learning communities" that are "responsive to the needs of all students" by providing "on demand asynchronous instruction" that is "paced by student readiness." That's great, but down in Irving, Texas, *they are slugging it out over homework*. Because, the *Dallas Morning News* writes,

At the beginning of the school year, Irving stopped counting homework toward grades, but tests, essays, projects and performances were counted.

And guess what ...

After the first six weeks of the year, about half of all the district's high school students—4,597—were failing one or more classes, compared with 3,412 students who were during the same period last year.

It seems that the average 15-year-old cannot make precise judgments about whether they need practice and/or opportunities for application of concepts to be fully prepared to demonstrate mastery. But not to worry; that's been addressed because

[Teachers](#) also must allow students who fail an exam to retest and give other students the option to do so if they want to improve their grade, even if they were caught cheating.

Now granted, you can't make anything higher than a 90 if you retake a test and it's not clear that if you made 50 the first time, and cheated the second time and made 60, whether you could then have a third try. Can you strike out completely? Not clear. So why no homework?

The district initially stopped counting homework because administrators felt it didn't measure students' actual learning as much as other assessments.

Why not? Does that mean the homework was not meaningful? Does it mean the students cheated

and so the work they turned in did not reflect their understanding? Does it mean that the students simply did not attempt homework, got zeros and then failed? Can't projects, essays, performance, and research be homework? And really, isn't conjugating five Latin verbs or completing five calculus problems a performance? Sure, a "no homework" policy makes life easier for everyone. The kids can opt out of assignments they consider unproductive. Parents don't have to nag. Teachers don't have to grade. It ought to be the ultimate win/win/win!

But parents and teachers were troubled that students appeared less prepared for tests because they weren't completing their work. They also were concerned that students who were [poor](#) test takers would fall behind.

Benefits of Homework Show Up in Its Absence

Maybe parents and teachers realize that expecting a teenager to self-assess their learning exceeds the expertise and the maturity of most 15-year-olds. If parents and teachers are life and academic coaches for adolescents, maybe there are lessons to be learned from coaches in professional sports. Every season we hear about athletes who are penalized for deciding to skip preseason practice because they have determined they don't need it. The funny thing is that although these adults are the best of the best, their coaches have no qualms about setting and enforcing expectations for conditioning, drills and practice. It seems that, no matter how good you are at something, practice helps and that most of us could use some outside motivation to get that practice accomplished.

The changes come because school districts are required to adopt grading policies as the result of a state law enacted last year [2009]. The law barred districts from setting minimum grades for students. For example, some districts previously did not allow teachers to assign report card grades lower than a 50. Now they can. The law also said students may be given an opportunity to redo class work or tests that they fail.

And so, here we stand—a decade into the 21st Century—and we're still fighting the homework wars. Are adolescents noble savages who are constrained by false constructs such as homework? Or are they insufficiently trained [workers](#) who need to learn to conform to consistent workplace expectations? Will more homework ensure that we leave no child behind, as well-intended but uninformed stakeholders continue to [race](#) willy-nilly to the top of the statehouse steps, legislating what "sounds like a good idea in theory" into [education](#) policy?

It seems that, no matter how good you are at something, practice helps and that most of us could use some outside motivation to get that practice accomplished.

I'm not picking on Irving—the grading conundrum is real.... It's just interesting to me that as we begin to explore reinventing school in theory, there is still an awful lot of energy and passion expended on how much homework there should be, whether to give zeros, and whether weighted or total point grading systems are best, how many grades should be collected per week, and what to do about late work.

In a perfect world, everyone would be intrinsically motivated to enrich their minds and produce their best efforts. It's not a perfect world. But when high school grading policy begins to be legislated at a state or national level, I wonder how we can ever move toward substantive changes in policy. Good intentions? Maybe. Good publicity? Probably. Good policy? I don't think so.

Further Readings

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