

West Hartford Public School District

Agenda Item: Homework Practices

Meeting Date: February 6, 2018

From: Paul Vicinus, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction

Through: Tom Moore, Superintendent

Background:

Board of Education policy #6330 outlines the legal reference and district philosophy regarding homework. The West Hartford Board of Education believes that homework is an integral part of the educational process. It provides opportunity to reinforce classroom learning. It can extend or engage learning outside of the classroom setting. It also contributes to the development of independence, responsibility, and self-discipline as lifelong learning skills.

Effective homework assignments shall be purposeful learning tasks aligned with learning objectives and designed to support students in their achievement of academic standards. Homework shall be carefully planned, communicated, and evaluated for its purpose, appropriateness, value, and consistency. Teachers at all grade levels will adhere to guidelines based on administrative regulations. Administrative regulations will be reviewed at least once every three years.

This report provides an overview of current research and best practices regarding homework and provides the framework for the review of existing administrative regulations. The content of this report will be shared widely with administrators and teachers. It serves as a reference for ongoing professional development to ensure adherence to the tenets of Board policy and our administrative guidelines.

Purpose of Homework

Teachers and parents harbor stated and unstated beliefs about the purpose of homework. The most commonly accepted stated beliefs fall into the following three broad categories:

- homework as an opportunity to practice new learning and solidify concepts and understandings
- homework as a tool to develop students' organizational skills, time management, and work habits
- homework as an opportunity for teachers to communicate with families about school work

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Unstated beliefs about homework are gleaned from parent and teacher perceptions about homework. Research shows that parents' perceptions about teacher effectiveness are strongly tied to homework. Generally, elementary teachers who assign a moderate to high volume of homework are perceived by parents as being more rigorous, having higher expectations for students, and being better teachers. That being said, (many of) the same parents have negative perceptions about the homework assignments themselves, feeling that they are burdensome, can be busy work, worry about student stress, and wish there was less homework. Conversely, those who assign less homework are often perceived as lazy, soft, or disorganized and (some) parents report feeling frustrated and worried about their children's preparedness. Overall, the tide of American public opinion regarding the homework issue has ebbed and flowed over the past 100 years from anti-homework activism to viewing homework as a critical response to a national crisis. Ultimately, research points to a balanced approach to homework.

Summary of Research Findings

1. **Homework has a positive impact on achievement.** At the high school level, a large body of research provides significant findings regarding the association between homework completion and school achievement (Cooper, Robinson, and Patall 2006; Trautwein et al. 2009). At the elementary level, research findings are mixed, however, research regarding subject specific homework in math and science showed a strong relationship between homework and achievement (Cooper et al. 2006). Finally, research indicates the value of homework at the early grades may not be realized until children are much older (Cooper 1998) as well as non-academic benefits for younger students (Marzano & Pickering, 2007).
2. **Age guidelines are recognized as effective practice** based on the association between the amount of time spent on homework (*vs. assigned*) and achievement. Research, the National Parent Teacher Association, and the National Education Association support a "ten minute" homework guideline at the elementary level (ten minutes x grade level per night). In middle school, the benefits of homework are shown to diminish after 90 minutes of homework. For high school students, between 1 ½ to 2 ½ hours per night is optimum. Less or more at the secondary level may diminish its effectiveness on achievement (Cooper, 1989; Cooper, Robinson, Patall, 2006).
3. **Meaningful parental involvement is much more than helping with homework.** Parents attitudes about homework have a profound influence on children's academic beliefs and modeling a positive attitude about homework is found to be associated with positive outcomes. Research warns parents against unsolicited assistance which can cause conflict. Best practice engages parents and students in communication about skills being taught in class and demonstration by students about what they know and can do. Students should ask for help when needed and parents might provide feedback to teachers regarding when students need more support with a topic.

4. **Teachers have a responsibility to design effective assignments and set conditions for student success.** Effective homework provides practice, checks for understanding, and opportunity to apply skills. Homework should provide students choices and offer some level of personal relevance. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics recommend short frequent assignments that practice content from past as well as current lessons and forecast future learning. Research shows this practice to be more effective than relying solely on assignments that feature same-day content. Explaining and modeling homework and providing feedback on assignments is also highlighted in research as best practice. Homework should not be assigned as “punishment” nor should it be used as an “overflow” strategy when running short on classroom instructional time.

5. **Common sentiments regarding homework loads conflict with research findings.** In contrast to the general perception, it appears that, on average, American students don’t do that much homework. A 2007 survey found high school students reporting doing an average of 6.8 hours of homework per week with less than half of these students having homework five days per week. Only one quarter of students in grades 3-12 report not having enough time to complete their homework; with a higher percentage among students typically earning a C or lower. Despite relatively few students reporting insufficient time for homework, a significantly high percentage of students report feeling “stressed” about having to complete homework and about one third of students claiming to be frequently stressed. The apparent disconnect is not fully explained by immature organizational skills and thus homework policies should consider the need for students to balance short and long-term assignments among multiple teachers as well as commitments and activities beyond the classroom (Van Voorhis, 2004).

Marzano and Pickering (2007) synthesized their review of homework research into “research-based homework guidelines” which include (i) assigning purposeful homework; (ii) manageable homework load and monitoring time to minimize overload; (iii) involving parents in ways that facilitate homework completion rather than help with homework content.

Types of Homework

Parents and teachers shared similar views on the types of homework that were most effective. The “most effective assignments” included the following:

- independent reading (all grade levels) and continuation of content area reading (secondary)
- math facts and skills practice (elementary); math skills and procedures (secondary)
- writing, reading, or project work that may require more sustained development, time-on-task, or building of stamina
- long-term projects that include research, planning and organization of ideas, critical thinking, writing, and presentation of ideas
- real-world application of skills
- differentiated assignments allowing for each student to apply appropriate level of skills and challenge

Summary

As a district leadership team, we will continue to have conversation regarding the alignment of our practice to administrative regulations, research, and best practice. We recognize homework is an integral part of the educational process providing opportunities to reinforce classroom learning and contributing to the development of student and self-discipline. As we continue to engage in conversation regarding our practice, we will focus on developing consistency within and across schools, communication with families to support productive involvement in homework routines, and teacher professional development to share best practice and support flexibility and differentiation.

Paul Vicinus, Kerry Jones and Anne McKernan are available to answer questions.