

# The Homework Scam

*Everyone agrees that it's important for kids to bring schoolwork home...But they're wrong.*

by William Lenard

- 1 Adults seldom bring work home from the office. Ambitious professionals or budding entrepreneurs may find they have to spend evenings "on the job," but most workers leave for tomorrow what can't be done well for today.
- 2 So why do we expect children to do homework? Everyone agrees: It's important for children to bring work home from school. But this idea is as profoundly false as it is universally embraced. The media, educators, and parents all encourage a practice that is fraudulent and destructive to children's learning. Assigned homework promotes careless, sloppy work. It is too often an invitation to plagiarism and cheating. And it is balm for parents who think they are participating in their child's education by asking, "Did you finish your homework?"
- 3 In some instances, homework makes sense. If the assignment is a genuine learning experience, and if children have the time and desire to study, it can be useful. Specially crafted assignments may also be helpful for students struggling with a routine aspect of their work.
- 4 But when pupils are confused by their lessons in school, homework is worse than useless. It is nonsense to require a score of practice exercises when there is not a careful review of the work by someone who can correct mistakes and push for quality. Homework without such review merely ensures that poor habits and carelessness will be diligently practiced until the youngster becomes brilliantly proficient in making splendid errors.
- 5 Parents could provide this review, but they need the will, the time, and the knowledge. Truth is most parents do not have all three. As a mathematics teacher, I found that parents could undo hours of instruction in minutes by tackling a child's request for help with the attitude: "That isn't the way I learned it."
- 6 And although homework is seen as a valuable chance for children to learn, that opportunity is lost when assignments are graded using a check-off system that rewards students merely for completing the work. In such systems, the students who honestly struggle with an assignment but cannot complete it get penalized. Shrewd, less honest students, meanwhile, find cooperative classmates with completed work and engage in some creative emulation. The good grades awarded such bogus efforts foster a dangerous attitude about cheating: The grades, after all, reflect success, but not learning.
- 7 And what about the youngsters who have no place, time, or means to do work at home? Their family responsibilities are sometimes awesome, more awesome than those of some adults. What good is achieved when such students are embarrassed or ridiculed for incomplete or undone homework?
- 8 School officials know—or should know the waste of homework assignments, but they continue the charade and pressure teachers to promote the fiction that homework is essential. Public schools are under fire, and the public expects homework. In the simplistic terms often used to debate how to improve schools, more time is better, more homework is better, and quantity is easy to measure.
- 9 Sending children home toting book bags heavy enough to break a camel's back is not the answer, though. The school day now runs about seven and half hours, and if students invest any major fraction of that time in serious mental work, they have done more with their intellect in one day than most adults do in a week. Study is intense and demanding.
- 10 Rather, we should schedule practice and application of new ideas during the school day. All disciplines should have laboratory periods where students can practice, and teachers should monitor that practice to ensure quality work and understanding.
- 11 You may have heard the story about a man walking in New York City with a violin case. A stranger approaches and asks, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" The man's response: "Practice, practice, practice." It's a mildly humorous anecdote that taps an obvious truth about success: Practice can work wonders.
- 12 But does practice have to take place at home to guarantee success? Youngsters spend many of their waking hours in school, away from home and family. They are expected to pay attention to their lessons every day, to cherish each teacher's words as if they were pearls. Give them a chance to put the pearls on a string while they are with the teacher. Application of new skills, practice of just-learned routines, and review of ideas should be done in school. Homework is best for most students when it is rare, optional, and specialized.

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