

Increase Effectiveness of Homework

**Strategy Target Areas (primary in bold):**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Academic School Success Factors** | | |
|  |  | **PWriting** |
| **Non-Academic School Success Factors** | | |
| **Behavior**   * Self-Regulation   **Engagement**   * Achieves/Attains Full Learning Potential * Attendance * **Completes and Turns in Homework** * Completing Assignments and Tests within Allotted Time * **Motivation, Effort, and Persistence** * Preparation and Initiation * Works Independently | **Executive Functioning**   * Attention/Focus * Emotional Control/Response Inhibition (self-control, suppression of actions, and resistance to interference) * Initiation * Metacognition and Self-Monitoring * Organization and Planning * Perseverance (effort) * Working Memory   **Social Emotional**   * Coping Skills * **Personal Decisions and Consequences** | **Foundational Learning Components**   * **Background Knowledge** * **Plan, Organize, and Complete Tasks** * **Study Skills** * Follow Multi-Step Instruction * Problem-Solving * **Efficiency and Time Management** |
| **Student Social Emotional, Engagement Success Factors** | | |
| **Internalizing Behavior**   * **Worrying** * **Self-Perception as a Student** * **Self-Perception as a Problem-Solver**   **Classroom Behavior**   * Effort * Persistence | **Accessibility to Learning**   * **Procedural Knowledge** * **Homework Checked at Home** | **Perception of School and Learning**   * Information Taught in an Interesting Way * **Importance of Learning**   **Academic Difficulty Level**   * **Difficulty with Homework** |

**Materials Needed:**none

**Background Information:**

Studies show that a research-based approach to homework improves academic achievement. There are ways to make homework doable and effective. According to research, when homework addresses specific goals and purposes, more students complete and turn in homework and, therefore, benefit from the assignments. In addition, students with learning challenges benefit from these characteristics as well, showing significant improvements in academic performance. Research has also indicated the importance of teacher invitations in motivating parent involvement, which increases effectiveness of homework and learning. Well-designed homework helps students learn. It also offers parents opportunities to see what students are learning, talk with children about their learning, and interact with teachers and other school-community members about ways to support student learning. Unfortunately, homework can do more harm than good if a student misunderstands the concept or the process. This could have a very negative effect on the student’s motivation in learning. Hence, it is crucial to design effective homework for students and monitor their success and challenges in homework completion.

**Strategy Implementation:**

There are seven characteristics of effective homework:

1. PURPOSE: All homework should have a purpose that is clear to both the students and the teacher. Students and parents should have a clear understanding of what to do and how to do it. Homework should not be assigned simply as part of routine. Rote assignments, busy work, and assignments on subject matter that has not yet been taught (new material), have been proven to be counterproductive. Finally, a one-size-fits-all approach to homework defeats the purpose of reinforcing or enriching learning. Homework should be differentiated when possible, especially for students who may need addition scaffolds due to skill level or language barriers. HOMEWORK SHOULD NEVER BE ASSIGNED AS A FORM OF PUNISHMENT. Homework should be used to:
   1. Pre-learn (reading a chapter before a classroom discussion or gathering information about family members’ hair or the ability to perform a "taco tongue" for an introduction to genetics)
   2. Check for understanding - have students:
      1. Use vocabulary in a sentence.
      2. Complete a few math problems and explain the steps.
      3. Use literary devices in a short story or poem.
      4. Use household items for assignments, such as counting shoes, forks, etc. and have parents/caregivers check off that the items were counted correctly.

The teacher can then assess understanding and adjust lessons in the classroom.

* 1. Practice: This is the most common use of homework and is significantly overused or used before the skill is mastered, which leads to frustration. Checking understanding should always happen before practice homework is given. For example, a teacher may teach long division in class and see that students are able to succeed with this task directly after instruction. The teacher then assigns 20 long division problems for homework and several students get home and realize they do not know how to complete the assignment. Finding that homework was not completed may lead to frustration and poor self-concept as a learner. After understanding is checked through limited classwork or homework, practice should be distributed over several days, rather than having it all in one night.
  2. Processing: As educators, we want to make sure students can apply information learned. Processing homework is often part of a long-term project, such as writing a report about concepts in a unit, writing an original short story or poem, or applying math problems in designing a blueprint of a house.

1. EFFICIENCY:
   1. Length: Homework should take no more than 10 minutes per night per grade, so first graders should have no more than 10 minutes of homework, while second graders should have no more than 20 minutes, and so on.
   2. Difficulty: The homework assigned should have just the right amount of challenge. If it is too easy, it may be rushed through with careless mistakes and cause boredom. If it is too hard, it may take too long and cause frustration. Both scenarios lead to negative feelings about homework and are, therefore, counterproductive.
   3. Learning Value: Assignments may also be inefficient because they show no evidence of learning: taking notes when reading a novel, coloring a map, and writing definitions of vocabulary words are common homework assignments, but have been proven to have little learning value. Instead, use a word in a sentence or identify which sentence uses the word correctly – these tasks require the student to apply knowledge. Studying for a test or reading a chapter may be too broad an assignment. Break the assignment down with a study sheet or specific tasks to complete while reading such as listing important ideas, asking questions, or recording reactions. Make sure when assigning creative homework that time spent is grade-appropriate and content-rich.
2. OWNERSHIP: Students who have choice and interest in the content of the assignment are more motivated to complete homework.
   1. Choices should be given on how to apply skills based on the students’ learning preferences so that each student has a choice that would engage and motivate him/her. For example, if spelling words are being reinforced, a student may be able to pick from a list of: writing the words three times, spelling them out loud to an adult and getting a signature, or using them in a sentence or silly story.
   2. Connecting the homework to student interests is also very motivating. If a teacher takes the time to get to know the interests of the students, these interests can be incorporated into choices and assignments.
   3. Connecting homework to community events/issues will build student investment and promote meaningful discourse. Additionally, assigning homework that allows students to highlight their cultural experiences also improves investment.
   4. Assign the students to design a method for learning a concept - a rap, a mnemonic device, drawing a picture, creating a game, making flashcards, writing "how to" instructions for others, etc. and share with partners, small groups or the whole class.

Reading – requiring students to read for a specific amount of time, a certain number of pages, etc. often has the negative effect of students reading less than if they were not given a parameter. It is better to suggest about 20-30 minutes a night, with an estimate of time spent reading given at the end of the week. At this time, the student may write a short paragraph about what has been read. Giving a choice of reflection questions may help guide this process. Reading can also become a family event like bedtime. In this case writing may or may not be appropriate, but teachers should allow for the families of their students to be involved.

1. COMPETENCE: Students have more positive feelings about homework when they are successful and feel good about what they are turning in to their teacher. When students are not successful, they often feel like a failure, and will tend to avoid the assignment to preserve their self-esteem. To give students the opportunity to succeed with their homework, consider:
   1. Differentiation: It is time to abandon the notion that every child must have the same homework. Homework that cannot be done independently is NOT good homework. Ways to accomplish this are:
      1. Varying the difficulty of assigned work. Some students may need simpler reading or more concrete tasks, others may need more challenging tasks or the opportunity to learn or apply concepts at a higher level.
      2. Varying the amount of work or kind of support given to the student, such as by giving a struggling writer fewer blanks to complete or answers that can be highlighted/circled instead of written out, providing word banks, filling out a graphic organizer instead of writing a paragraph, loaning a math manipulative for homework, or providing hint sheets.
      3. Giving the students a choice of homework options, where such choices are varied by learning preference.
   2. Time Commitment: Homework should be time-based, rather than task-based so that struggling students are not spending excessive time on homework. For example, "Answer as many math questions as you can in 10 minutes, then draw a line and continue if you would like.”
   3. Task Explanation: Teachers must also take care to adequately explain the homework—preferably in writing—and structure the activities so students know how to complete them.
   4. Prompt Feedback: Teachers should provide prompt feedback for the task completed. Students benefit when teachers and other adults offer specific (related directly to the homework – “I like how you explained your answer.”) positive responses to student homework performance.
2. AESTHETICS: Boring and tedious sheets with lines of questions or endless math problems will often result in the decision to avoid homework. First impressions are important! This is especially important to younger students and students who are challenged. The assignment should look engaging, interesting, and not too hard or overwhelming. Some ways to do this are:
   1. Place less information on each page.
   2. Ensure there is enough space for the students to write their answers.
   3. Use clip art or pictorial representation to increase interest and understanding.
3. SUPPORTIVE STRATEGIES:
   1. Encourage Parent/Family Involvement in Homework***:*** Parents are an essential element of successful homework practice; many studies and reviews of the literature have found that increased parent involvement is associated with improved student achievement. Teachers can involve parents to help with homework or academic concepts. Engaged parents value teachers’ efforts, which improves teachers’ confidence. Knowing more about a student’s family life can also help teachers prepare lessons that better fit that student’s needs or interact more efficiently with families. When parents and teachers team up, everyone wins! Some of the ways to get parents involved are:
      1. Provide guidance to parents regarding the purpose of the assignment and how teachers would like parents to help. Provide parents with a list of suggestions on how to best help their children with homework. The list may include items such as: set up a homework area (see below), have a regular homework schedule, have students make a plan and help them break larger assignments into smaller pieces, praise work efforts, and reach out to the teacher if there are problems with homework time.
      2. Send information home for parents regarding HOW to complete the homework. For example, parents may not be familiar with specific math methods, so a short video link or parent letter to use as a reference when helping their child would be helpful. Also, an answer sheet or guide to let parents know what you are looking for will help set realistic expectations.
      3. Ask Parents for their feedback on homework tasks and whether or not the child is able to accomplish his/her work independently. This will help teachers to understand student’s competency, assign appropriate work for each student, and avoid student frustration or boredom related to the homework.
      4. Provide guidelines to parents about creating a homework environment that is conducive to learning. For example, assign a specific work area and time for homework, keep this area clutter free, have all school supplies in this space, etc. These guidelines can be communicated at back to school nights, in classroom newsletters, emails, and at parent–teacher conferences.
      5. Recommend that parents encourage their children to take “movement breaks” during homework completion. Research shows that exercise (even just 10-15 minutes) significantly improves executive functioning and overall cognition. Movement breaks can involve aerobic or non-aerobic exercise: kick a soccer ball, play basketball, do yoga, take a walk, run in place, jumping jacks, push-ups. They can happen inside or outside. Parents can give their children two movement passes to use when the student chooses or when a parent notices that the student needs a break.
      6. Maintain weekly or monthly communication with parents so you understand if their child needs extra help at any point of time during the school year.
   2. Teaching Students Self – Regulation: Research indicates that homework effectiveness is improved by helping children to self-regulate. By integrating self-regulation skills into the curriculum, teachers add a level of effectiveness to homework that will serve all their students throughout the rest of their lives. Some classroom strategies to enhance self-regulation are:
      1. Teach and encourage the use of planners and other tools in classroom. These tools should be part of classroom routines and modeled by the teacher.
      2. Remind students of due dates and other important dates both orally and by writing them on the board. Ask students to note these in their planners.
      3. Train students for different time management and organizing skills.
      4. Teach students to look for the cues that they may need a movement break. Even just 1-5 minutes significantly improves focus and learning. Cues may be increasing frustration, getting the “wiggles”, inability to focus or getting easily distracted, or low energy and fatigue.
4. FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN HOMEWORK
   1. Homework is often a stressful event for the average family. While they see the need for it, they don’t enjoy doing it if it causes stress and tantrums in the house. For many families helping kids with homework is hard because they do not understand how something is being taught, and if the child is uninterested or does not know how to complete the work, it creates a stressful environment.
      1. At the beginning of the year when teachers host parent teacher nights, have families share what home supports look like, what their availability is for homework or if there is an older sibling, cousin, grandparent, aunt, etc. to help out. This is also a time to have families fill out a home survey. On this survey you can ask about different family traditions, cornerstones in their neighborhood, etc. These questions can allow for the teacher to create some fun and engaging projects that both the student and parent feel excited and empowered to create.
      2. Use the information gained to create moments at home for the child to do project-based homework assignments. For example, if a parent says that they cook a lot together as a family and there is a ‘writing a how-to’ unit, you can have the child write and draw pictures of how to make a meal in their home.
      3. It is often helpful to have a caregiver sign off that the homework was attempted.

**Helpful Hints:**

1. You may find more success if homework is tailored to each student, but this will be time-consuming. Instead, group students together for differentiated homework (amount of problems, level of difficulty, visual aids, etc.). As you assign these tasks, be discreet in assigning differentiated homework to avoid singling out students (i.e. blue homework sheets, triangle problems, etc.).
2. Create homework assignments with the collaboration of your grade-level team and other support staff (ESL teachers, EC/Special Education teachers, etc.). This will create efficiency and enable higher quality assignments through sharing ideas, splitting subjects/tasks, differentiating areas, finding clip art/pictures, etc.
3. When homework is not completed consistently, teachers need to speak to the child and family to try to understand the reason behind it before taking any punitive actions. This student might be benefited with customized homework, completing homework at school or in after school care, provision of school supplies for home, and/or adjustments to content/difficulty level.

If homework must count as a “grade,” it will be much more successful—especially in math—for the grade to be a “completion” grade rather than a grade of accuracy. This way, the student gets full credit for attempting each problem and is not penalized for making mistakes on a concept he/she doesn’t yet fully understand. The students are more willing to take the time to attempt the full problem knowing they may get it wrong but won’t be penalized and the teacher can see exactly where the break-down occurs.

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