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Quick Study

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Homework Rules

by John Bachmann

Educators in Toronto have come up with another suggestion for improving the lives and learning of school kids. Homework, it seems, has gotten out of control and needs to be reduced.

It's important to remember that not too many years ago these same experts – in Ontario's faculties of education, school board offices, and ministry of education – were promoting open-area classrooms whose 100-decibel noise levels were supposed to enhance learning.

More recently, they decided that penalizing students for handing assignments in late is cruel and unusual punishment. I'm guessing the experts figure all of Ontario's students are going to get jobs in education where timeliness isn't all that important. Certainly, this kind of thinking doesn't reflect the reality of the time-sensitive world that most of us work in!

Actually, it doesn't even reflect what goes on in public schools where classroom teachers valiantly try to get through the curriculum despite many lost teaching days and numerous other disruptions both inside their classrooms and out.

Has homework really become an issue? Yes, but not for the reasons that those running our schools would have you believe. The experts will tell you teachers are assigning more homework because parents are putting pressure on them to do so – all in an effort to get their seven-year-olds better positioned for acceptance by the best universities.

There may be an element of parental pressure at work here, but a more important reason is that much homework is being used to compensate for inefficient teaching methods.

Summary

- Toronto educators are considering a policy of reducing the amount of homework.
- The biggest problem with existing homework is that it is inappropriate.
- A board-wide homework policy will work well in some cases but not in others.
- Toronto should introduce more school choice.

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The provincial curriculum contains too much material for teachers to cover in the available time using the popular “discovery learning” teaching approach. In some cases, teachers are actually downloading the responsibility for teaching new material onto parents. Far too many homework assignments involve concepts not covered in class.

In contrast, truly effective homework reinforces skills learned that day, and allows teachers to provide their students with feedback in a timely fashion. Too few educators know about this research.

The most troubling aspect of the whole process is that the decision on homework will be applied board-wide. Uniformity is troublesome because people differ widely. Many strategies work well for some children and teachers, but not others.

- Some classroom teachers who are currently using the homework tool appropriately will be rendered less effective because they will be forced to change.
- Many parents will disagree with the homework decision, but unless they can afford an independent school, they will be forced to live with it.
- Some children will be bored, overwhelmed, or alienated, depending on which way the decision goes.

A wide range of options is especially important in education, because teachers and children are “co-producers”, and the effectiveness of instruction depends to a great extent on the child’s engagement in the process.

The homework debate highlights a continuing need for publicly-funded independent schools that provide parents with alternatives such as direct instruction, high expectations with consequences for non-performance, and reasonable amounts of well thought-out homework.

The Toronto School Board prides itself on offering many alternatives for parents, but it steadfastly refuses to offer a “traditional” program incorporating these elements – even though this is the most popular option with parents in other jurisdictions, such as Alberta, when they are given the choice to act on their preferences.

Even though the idea of faith-based independent schools has become a non-starter – as John Tory found out the hard way in the last Ontario election – the need for publicly-supported independent schools that differentiate themselves on secular issues such as instructional methods, expectations related to student behaviour, and, yes, homework policies, remains as strong as ever.

