

SPRING 2000

Home Learning is a Partnership Process

Homework. Is it a hassle or an opportunity? When homework is viewed as irrelevant or too time consuming, rather than as a valuable chance to extend learning, both educators and families are dissatisfied. How do we ensure all involved view homework as an important part of home learning, and home learning as an essential part of the educational experience? We come to that understanding by developing a sound partnership between home and school.

The value of homework is realized when families and schools agree on the purposes for home learning, and see that homework and home learning serve the same purposes. They may reinforce important concepts; provide additional practice; and expand learning to other situations. What's more, they provide opportunities for parents and children to communicate about meaningful issues.

Communication is crucial. To achieve this, partners must reach out to discuss the benefits of home learning. Effective communication may include signing homework to indicate parent involvement and reaction; inviting parents to participate in policy decisions about homework; day or evening telephone calls or parent-teacher conferences; letters, notes sent home with students, e-mail or newsletters.

Environment is key. Families often seek guidance on creating an effective home learning environment. The box below lists some ideas for families to keep in mind about setting up a work space for students at home, but they must also remember that everyday activities often provide opportunities for creating a learning environment. Paying bills, reading the newspaper, even doing laundry or a discussing a favorite TV show can be used to point out real applications of educational subjects. Everyone can find or create fun games and activities. (See Resource Materials, back page). Communication styles should value learning by inviting questioning and discussion.

Location: Workspace should be relatively quiet. A high traffic area where the dog and family run through probably isn't the right spot. The area should be away from the tv, telephone and other activities; however, some students benefit from soft music to help them to concentrate.

Materials: If the child spends time each day on a scavenger hunt looking for pens, paper or his book bag, precious time is lost. Keep study supplies nearby in a specially designated, easily accessible place.

Study Position: No one seating style is right for all children. Seating should be comfortable while maintaining the child's alertness and attention. Good lighting and a surface for writing are musts.

Scheduled Time: Fitting homework around sports, jobs and lessons is often a major cause of concern. It is helpful to develop a weekly schedule that maps out after-school activities and builds in study time each day. The key is to keep homework a top priority in the schedule.

Schools and families must join together as partners to help students build learning skills. Home learning provides needed practice and confidence-boosting experiences. Because the most consistent connection of parents to school is often through homework, it is vitally important that parents feel engaged in their child's learning. Home learning is an essential component of family life, and schools play an primary role in ensuring this.

Rosemary Tralli, educational consultant, Glastonbury, CT, works with local, state and national school teams on instructional approaches and strategies that enhance student learning. She spoke at our most recent networking meeting on homework and home learning issues.

Interactive Homework Promotes Student Success

Of all the types of family involvement, the one most parents want to know about is: How do I help my child at home? But schools often have difficulty organizing this important type of involvement. To meet this need, Joyce Epstein and others at the National Network for Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University worked with teachers to design Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) for interactive homework.

What is TIPS? TIPS is a 3-way partnership of students, families, and teachers.

TIPS activities require students to talk to someone at home about something interesting they are learning in class. The homework is the students' responsibility; parents are not asked to "teach". This enables all families to become involved, not just those comfortable with math, science or other subjects.

The TIPS activities keep school on the agenda at home so that children know their families believe schoolwork is important.

What are TIPS Activities? TIPS provides examples that teachers in every grade and subject can use to design homework that matches the learning objectives for their students.

Some TIPS examples may be useful just as they are, but to match specific learning objectives, TIPS are easily adapted. Teachers who see the activities usually say, "I can do that!"

How Do Teachers Develop TIPS?

- Work together during the summer months to develop TIPS interactive homework assignments to match curricula.
- Use assignments with students and families.
- Make revisions based on feedback from students, parents, and teachers.

TIPS homework may then be shared with schools with similar curricula. Support for a few teachers in the summer then, yields materials that can be used by many teachers for many years.

From School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action by J.L. Epstein, L. Coates, et al. 1997, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc. To order TIPS manuals and activities, (\$10.00 or less for each item), please contact the National Network of Partnership Schools at 410-516-8808 or on the web at www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000.

Schools Share Partnership Practices

After-School Homework Program a Big Success

The Family Resource Center at the Savin Rock Community School in West Haven is the site for a new after-school homework program. Three days a week, about 60 children take part. At the end of the school day, the children meet in the cafeteria with paid parent volunteers for a healthy snack. The snacks are provided free of charge through a federal program.

After snack-time, the students, in small groups, accompany parents, teachers and 5th grade tutors to classrooms to get to work. There is no shortage of people to help students who benefit from special attention. Children who have no homework may be given extra assignments, and there is also a smaller group for intensive reading tutoring. Supplies are given to students who need them.

Most importantly, this program costs the school nothing. Overlapping grants supporting family and community involvement support all costs involved.

All Students to Read 20 Minutes Daily

"We have invited all parents and guardians to assist our students to become the best readers they can be," says Laurelle Texidor, principal at Winthrop School in New London. As part of their first year of implementing Success for All, they expect each student to read 20 minutes daily with an adult outside of school. This is such an important part of what they expect from each student that it is even posted on the message board in front of the school.

Family members sign a "Read and Respond" form each time they read with a student, turning it in each week. Parents and community members volunteer after school to listen to students read to them. This provides equal opportunity to those students who have trouble finding someone available at home.

The school also focuses on early reading and related activities that can be done at home at some of its community meetings, and once a month, a Student Recognition Day gives the school a chance to publicly acknowledge students' successes. Congratulations to each of the more than 90% of students that Ms. Texidor estimates are actively participating.

CT School-Family-Community Partnerships, a project of the State Department of Education, helps educators, parents and community members develop partnerships by providing training and resources designed to promote policies and programs at the local level and to increase public awareness of the positive impact of school-family-community partnerships on student learning.

Staff: Judy Carson, Harriet Feldlaufer & Wendy Harwin, CT State Department of Education; Barbara Slone, SERC

Teachers' Remedies for Homework Headaches

Students who complete their homework successfully increase their chances for academic success. But homework develops habits and attitudes that work to a student's advantage far beyond the classroom. Qualities like self-discipline, responsibility and a love of learning benefit students throughout their lives. Homework can bring together children, parents, and teachers in an effort to improve learning. Teachers are vital in making this happen.

Create assignments with purpose:

Any homework is *not* better than no home work. The quality of an assignment makes a huge difference in whether it gets done. Make assignments focused and clear. Be sure students understand the purpose. Homework should be a positive experience to encourage children to learn and enjoy learning. Assignments should never be used as punishment.

Create assignments that challenge students to think:

Capture their interest with assignments like:

- Write a paragraph about Aunt Melba that breaks 10 rules of capitalization. Have students see if their peers can figure out which rules were broken.
- Write a 30-second radio spot using George Washington to sell soap. Work in 4 facts about his role as a general.
- Here is an answer: 54. Generate 10 questions or problems that can be answered with that number.

Assign an appropriate amount of homework:

Too much homework becomes drudgery. Keep students' attention; keep them inspired to do the homework. Coordinate assignments with those of other teachers, and be aware of how long it takes students to do the work.

Give help as needed:

Teach good study habits. Provide constructive feedback, including lots of praise. Students may need extra support with academic or organizational aspects. Schedule time for individual students before or after school, during free periods or lunch, or give out a home number for specific evening hours.

Communicate with families:

Learning improves when teachers and families communicate well. Parents can be an enormous help in creating a home environment that values learning. Suggest ways to do this, and to work together to strengthen all learning, including what takes place at home.

Make an effort to help parents feel welcome:

Tell parents how best to contact you. Give out assignment books with this information, as well as space for comments from both parents and teacher on each task. Parents get different messages from different teachers, so give them tips on how to be involved with their child's homework.

The booklet from which this article was excerpted is full of ideas for easing homework headaches. Best of all, the booklet, *Helping your students with homework: A guide for teachers*, (Nancy Paulu) is available free of charge by calling 1-877-4-EDPUBS.

CT Wins Family Literacy Grant

The Connecticut State Department of Education's new Bureau of School-Family-Community Partnerships has been awarded an important two-year federal grant targeting family literacy. Through a Statewide Family Literacy Consortium of committed professionals, local program operators and families, this grant will strengthen and expand existing family literacy programs, fostering collaboration and filling gaps in the current provision of such services.

An especially exciting focus of this work is the creation of a new Family Development Credential for people in Connecticut working with families. Developed at Cornell University, the program will offer quality competency-based training leading to a credential and college credit. It is designed to reorient the way that individuals and families are assisted toward an empowering, strengths-based, family support approach.

This federal grant makes possible critical expansion and coordination between Connecticut's Family Literacy programs, which will increase consistency and effectiveness, improving the overall quality of Connecticut's entire Family Literacy system.

Resource Materials on S-F-C Partnerships Available For Loan

How to help your child with homework: Every caring parent's guide to encouraging good study habits and ending the homework wars. Radencich, M. & Schumm, J. (1997). Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing Inc. Aimed at the parents of children ages 6-13, this book offers expert advice from teachers on how to halt homework battles and help children with reading, math, science, and social studies. Includes 24 reproducible masters.

Family learning: How to help your children succeed in school by learning at home. Russell, W. (1997). St. Charles, IL: First Word Learning Systems, Inc. The activities in this book help parents supplement and encourage classroom learning, emphasizing the importance of learning as a family unit. Targeting families of school-aged children, the author shows that opportunities for learning are everywhere, and shows parents and teachers how to locate, create, and use high-interest learning activities to stimulate curiosity and learning in the home, as part of everyday life.

Homework improvement: A parent's guide to developing successful study habits in children before it's too late. Schneiderman, R. & Werby, S. (1996). Glenview, IL: Good Year Books. Aimed at parents of children grades 4 through 8, this book teaches parents how to help their child establish good learning habits, how to support their child without doing homework assignments themselves, and how to guide their child in approaching any school assignment.

School success takes teamwork: Taming the homework monster. Successful Parenting (1997). Winston Salem, NC: Richards & Taylor Productions. This practical video helps parents understand and deal with the homework problems that can lead to arguments, tears, late nights and low grades. It comes with a take-home booklet full of tips, advice and questions to ask students, and a facilitator's guide with detailed suggestions for conducting workshops on the topic.

Your home is a learning place. Weinberg, P. (1993). Syracuse, NY: Signal Hill Publications. This award-winning book contains simple activities and strategies to help parents enhance learning at home, often in the context of things parents already do daily. For example, cooking becomes a shared activity and an opportunity to practice both reading and math skills. It is simply and clearly written, and is appropriate for low-literacy parents.

For more information, please contact:
Wendy Harwin, Project Coordinator
Connecticut State Department of Education
phone: (860) 566-7856
fax: (860) 566-2957
e-mail: sde.partnership@po.state.ct.us
www.state.ct.us/sde/sfcpl/toc.htm

