

Homework

Recently, homework in today's schools dominated at one of our dinner conversations. Our daughter, Lisa, and her son, an eighth grader, told us that homework in local schools begins in the primary grades and escalates during the middle grades (6-8). Teachers feel pressured to hand out extra work in order to comply with the required coverage of subject matter and to avoid the guillotine executions of federal and state tests. These constant invasions into affairs of homes are also accompanied by the elimination of stimulating school activities, formerly part of the every day curriculum—music, art and physical education. While driving a car, after retirement, I occasionally referred to drab-looking schools I'd pass as prison-like. Instead of a chain gang breaking rocks, today's students are breaking their backs, carrying overloaded backpacks. Homework comprises an essential ingredient of their burden.

The rationale for increasing the homework load in the middle schools is preparing students for high school. In high school, the rationale is preparing students for college. Where is the rationale of preparing students for enriching their present and future lives?

As a teacher, over a quarter century ago, I didn't give homework unless requested by the students (which, of course, rarely occurred). I considered dull homework as an imposition on family life.

Instead of subject-oriented homework, I organized numerous home or community projects. One home project was ascertaining the number of colds each student had during the winter and finding possible ways to avoid or cure colds. Each morning we included ten or fifteen minutes of our schedule to discuss colds or related health topics. A few students (with parental approval) tested my theory that drinking buttermilk daily could prevent colds. After four months, those drinking buttermilk had no colds or had milder cases of colds.

The major home-school projects were the nearby Sellwood Garden and Junior SMILE (Sellwood Moreland Improvement League), a student affiliate of the local community group. In cooperation with that adult group, Sellwood students, primarily from my class, conducted a citizens' petition to create the Sellwood Library. Before the creation of the Sellwood Library, local residents had weekly service provided by Portland's Mobile Library Unit. Our class also organized car caravans of parents for annual trips to the ocean or other field trips.

Throughout my thirty years as a teacher, I believed that the primary educational institution was the family. Only on occasion, such as for children from dysfunctional families, did the school become the primary educator. Thus, I encouraged close home-school relationships. Due to historic changes within families, I'm beginning to re-evaluate my attitude toward homework.

The national family situation has changed drastically since my teaching—1950-1980. At that time the average family had one wage earner. Mothers were available throughout the

day and night. Children spent hours outdoors, building relationships through play and exploring the environment beyond the home.

On top of family change, the Industrial Revolution evolved into the High-Tech Age. The computer and its allied electronic menagerie bewilder individuals like me. But youth thrive and enjoy each new leap from reality into the electronic, virtual world.

My grandson, like most of his male friends, is addicted to electronic gadgets, especially the new video and computer games. Seldom do he or other children leave the home to explore or play street or park games. Our neighborhood families do not encourage or permit their children to venture into the city's streets or parks, even though our area has one of the lowest crime rates in Portland.

Present day family fears and electronic addiction are two primary reasons for our nation's increased fat production among youth. These two factors have influenced my thinking about homework. I believe that homework has far less negative impact on family life than do the fear factor and electronic addiction. In fact, today, homework can be a pathway toward more wholesome family and social relationships.

Homework generally extends work from the regular school curriculum. Doing work at home on classroom types of activities usually involves communication between parents and their children (possibly the only communication between them). It also may extend communication in person or via phone or computer between classmates. Time devoid of electronics adds positive time for real personal communication.

If teachers became aware of homework's creative possibilities, they could revolutionize education in its most dismal areas—middle and high schools. Homework could be a method of gaining mentorship within a student's major interest. It could explore nature's wonders or one's own family history, traditions, or achievements. It could encourage students to create projects or original work in their field of interest. Homework could open up a new source of energy by having students provide community service.

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