



SUSTAINING OUTSTANDING SCHOOLS: SOS

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Marzano's high yield strategies: Homework and practice

Robert Marzano and his research group have analyzed the research literature on teaching and learning in order to identify the teaching strategies that provide the highest gains in student achievement. Using the research technique called “meta-analysis” (a process that collects a number of studies and combines the results to explore trends), Marzano and his group have identified nine strategies that produce the highest gains in students' achievement. These “high yield” strategies offer a great deal of promise for classroom instruction.

This issue of SOS features the instructional strategy, “Homework and Practice.” Research shows that the effective use of homework and practice results in a 28-point percentile gain in student achievement. As Marzano indicates, “Homework and practice are ways of extending the school day and providing students with opportunities to refine and extend their knowledge. Teachers can use both of these practices as powerful instructional tools.” (2001, p. 71). However, perhaps no other instructional strategy evokes such strong emotions from both teachers and students. And, let's not forget parents!!

Issues surrounding homework

What are some of the issues that prevent homework from being implemented in the most effective manner?

One very common complaint teachers make about homework relates to parents, especially parental over-involvement in completing homework with and/or for their students. Schools need to clarify and communicate the purpose and practice of homework at their school and

the parents' appropriate role.

In these times where families are rushed and sometimes over scheduled, homework can be seen as an additional stressor, and parents may “help” in order to shorten the length of the stress. In addition, some research studies indicate that parents place less value on homework than the teachers who assign it. If parents view homework as less valuable and important, then they may not see it as “so bad” when they over-assist their students in completing it. Similarly, homework can be perceived as “just busy work.”

Teachers address this issue by making certain that the homework being assigned has true instructional value that can be seen by both parents and students. Homework that requires students to “practice” something that has not yet been fully taught may prompt parents to “rescue” their child by doing it for him or her.

Another complaint about homework comes from the student camp. Rarely, it seems, do students ascribe great value to homework. Rather, they view it as something that must be endured. Most likely, they perceive it as an obstacle that stands between them and some other desired activity! As Marzano suggests, it may be helpful to clearly articulate the objectives for the homework assignment and why it is beneficial to their learning. Additionally, if we believe that homework supports important learning, students should receive immediate feedback as to their performance on the learning objectives, not just a grade that indicates completion.

Implications for practice

Define the value of homework

As a school staff, it would be useful to discuss the importance and the role of homework as an instructional strategy that can provide practice for important skills and concepts. What are “good” (i.e., useful for learning) reasons for assigning homework in this school? What are “bad” (i.e., not useful for learning) reasons? What does “good” homework in my classes look like? This does not mean that teachers adopt a lockstep approach to assigning homework; rather, it is meant to suggest that schools can better realize the full benefits of this instructional strategy when teachers reach consensus about what is effective practice and then commit to follow their own guidelines. (A Faculty Reflection and Consensus Building Worksheet on Homework is available at the CCSE Web site www.luc.edu/ccse.)

Assess the value of homework

If one of the purposes of homework is to reinforce and practice critical skills, then it is vital that the homework reflects this value. If homework consists of “busy work” and contains no critical skills, this serves only to reinforce the incorrect perception that homework is unimportant. Additionally, if students do not readily see how the homework is directly reinforcing skills learned in class, compliance with completion and turning it in will be low—or sloppy. This can be true especially for students with high ability. If the homework does not challenge them to grow, it can be disregarded easily as unimportant, inadvertently reinforcing

ing a “rushing through” completion of the homework. However, if they can see that the homework *is* a valuable learning experience, students are more likely to comply. It is critical that teachers ask themselves—EACH time they assign a piece of homework—“How will this allow my students to practice the target skill?” and “How have I communicated this to them?” and “Has the instruction so far prepared them to be successful?” Teachers also must reflect on the question “Is this piece of homework really worth assigning?” Do not assume that “just because” this is an assigned homework, students will value it and consider it important.

Home-school connection

Never assume that parents know their role in completing homework. As a staff, explicitly define the role of the parent in helping with homework. Then, create opportunities to “teach” parents these expectations. Direct communication regarding parent responsibilities in homework can go a long way to addressing this concern. This may need to be completed in parent-education workshops conducted by the school. What a great way to showcase the talent of the school staff. Imagine the power if a school were to have a consistent, systematic response to this issue.

Create and articulate homework policy

Examine the current policy on homework in your school handbook. Does it clearly articulate the reasons for homework and why it is critical in reinforcing student learning? Does it describe the role of the parent in supporting the student’s completion of homework? Are consequences for non-completion clearly specified?

Develop a strong feedback loop

If we ascribe great importance to homework, then it should also carry a commensurate level of importance on the kind of feedback that we provide

to students. If all we do is record a grade of “completion” in response to homework, students soon will discover that they need not put forth great effort in completing homework. However, if teachers give thoughtful feedback in a formative manner on the performance on homework, students will ascribe more value to the assignment. Remember that homework can provide great diagnostic information on progress toward learning goals.

Assess the impact of the instructional strategy

Sometimes, homework is assigned because, traditionally, that is what schools do! If homework is to be an instructional aid, then the impact on student achievement should be assessed. As with all instructional strategies (as well as with any school structure or policy), there should be a positive impact on learning. Therefore, when an instructional strategy isn’t producing or supporting learning, it should be modified or replaced. The same is true with homework. Staff regularly should ask of any homework assignment “Is it producing the depth of learning that I want?” and look for the data to support the answer.

Suggestions for schools

- Read and discuss the SOS article and support materials at a faculty meeting or team meetings. (Watch the webcast together to spark discussion.) Use the Faculty Reflection and Consensus Building Worksheet on Homework available at www.luc.edu/ccse to frame discussion and clarify expectations and commitments.
- Share examples of how the strategy is currently used by teachers—be specific. Make suggestions for how to use the strategy more effectively.
- In learning teams, go deeper. Examine the steps and the pitfalls. Agree on and clearly identify one

concrete thing you will all do to improve the use of the strategy of assigning homework in a specific subject/course over the next two weeks. Agree to log your actions and set a schedule for sharing homework assignments and results with one other at least once. Act as “critical friends”—talk about whether the assignment connects well to learning objectives and instructional activities. Has the connection to learning been communicated well to students? Is the feedback given on the homework truly formative to promote increased learning? Arrange with the principal and/or department chair to engage in the same “critical friend” sharing.

- Share observations about using the strategy and its impact on learning. Refine and agree on actions for the next two weeks.
- Share actions taken and observations of the impact at the next faculty meeting. ❖



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