

COUNTERPOINT

Homework is beneficial — but in moderation

Thomas G. Lengel, head of school, Holy Child School at Rosemont, wrote this for the "Healthy Kids" blog at philly.com/healthykids.

In a column that appeared last week in this space, Katherine Dahlsgaard made a strong case that schools should drop all homework assignments. Her argument is based on several research studies that prove that homework does not equate to school success. She correctly notes from her experience as lead psychologist of the Anxiety Behaviors Clinic at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia that homework often leads to added stress and anxiety among children and their families.

Respectfully, however, I think Dr. Dahlsgaard paints this issue with too broad a stroke. This debate, which is popping up around the country, is not and should not be framed as a binary choice between lots of homework that adds to sleep deprivation and student and family stress, or no homework at all. It seems to me that labeling any and all homework as ineffective or unproductive is akin to claiming that we should ban all planes when a single one crashes. Let's consider the "pilot error" involved when homework assignments become problematic and deal with that, rather than blaming system error and thus try to ground all the planes.

We did precisely that last year at Holy Child. We established a task force that reviewed current research about homework. We polled our parents and students about the homework students were assigned and how long it took them to complete, and we consulted with our teachers.

What we found is that the issue is more about the quality of an assignment (in our middle school, especially) and that if the quantity is managed carefully, then homework assignments can be effective and worthwhile.

A general rule of thumb we use is 10-15 minutes per grade level, meaning that first graders should be assigned 10-15 minutes of work, second graders 20-30, up to eighth graders doing about 1-2 hours of homework a night. That seems an age-appropriate quantity, not an onerous one.

As important is the quality of homework we ask students to do. If the assignments are busywork or are given without enough thought to their purpose, then almost any amount of homework is too much. But our first graders, for example, practice letter formation and spelling, along with basic addition. That reinforces the learning they do in the classroom and saves classroom time for introducing new concepts such as place value or the silent "e." Middle school math homework serves as an assessment for the teachers; they can tell which concepts most of the class has mastered, and which need reinforcement.

As Rita Smith, our director of early childhood, explains, purposeful homework helps "make a connection between the home and school. Parents who work with their young children on homework can then build on their child's knowledge or practice something that they might be having trouble with. Story reading is homework for many young children. We ask the parents to read to the children and consequently children might begin to read simple things to their parents. This is invaluable as you go through kindergarten."

Ben Franklin famously advised that we should do "everything in moderation." That is great advice for educators to ponder as they assign homework this new school year!

Holy Child School at Rosemont is an independent, coeducational, Catholic school, early childhood through eighth grade, that is accredited by the Pennsylvania Association of Independent Schools (PAIS).