

Tackling the Homework Dilemma



By Lee Jenkins

Is homework a subject or a method? If it is a subject, shouldn't teachers request that homework grades be included on the report card alongside other subjects? If it is a method, how can teachers justify grading students on instructional methods?

Somewhere between these two extremes of not grading homework (because it is a method) and adding a new subject (homework) is an alternative I learned from John McDonald, a teacher in Rochester, Minnesota.

John assigned homework but did not collect it or grade it. Instead, he gave a homework quiz. He chose two questions verbatim from the previous night's homework assignment and graded students' responses to those two questions. He did not grade students on whether they did their homework; he graded based on the knowledge in their heads. His students considered this process efficient and fair.

Think about it. With this strategy, homework is no longer about writing something down to hand in; instead, it is about learning. Students can study for the homework quiz by writing, reading, talking on the phone with a friend, texting, or discussing with parents. The final goal is to know the answer to the questions.

John's method solves several homework issues that have plagued educators for decades:

- **Students are no longer punished for being smart.** They no longer lament, "It's not fair that I have to work on something I already know." If they have listened in class, used study time wisely, or have prior background knowledge, they have no homework and receive credit for what they know.

Lee Jenkins is a former superintendent turned education consultant.
E-mail: Lee@LtoJConsulting.com

- **Students do not receive credit for copied homework.** The focus is on learning, not writing down someone else's answers just to get credit for doing the homework.
- **Students do not receive credit for parents doing the homework.** Certainly, parents can help students learn the content, but students don't receive credit for papers their parents complete.
- **Teachers have time to prepare for the next day instead of spending so much time grading homework.** Now they can put that time into becoming more creative, effective teachers.

I have shared John's homework process in hundreds of seminars and have been intrigued by some of the results when teachers implement it in their classrooms.

A middle school math teacher lets the first student in the door roll dice to determine the two homework problems that will be used for the homework quiz. Students rush to be the first to his classroom merely to roll the dice. He reports going from 27% Ds and Fs to 9%.

A mom told me her son is a good math student and all of his friends know it. When her son's math teacher adopted this system, her son's evenings changed from doing homework about content he already knew to helping his friends learn the content. They texted, e-mailed, and phoned him throughout the evening to get help with their math.

Subject or method? Homework should have a purpose, and that purpose should be to increase knowledge and understanding. Dilemma solved. 