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Schools Exceeding Expectations (SEE) Conference
Maryville, Tennessee – April 29-May 2, 2009

Book Talk

The Homework Myth

Presented by Susan Kovalik

2009 SEE Conference – Saturday, May 2, 2009

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The Homework Myth – Battling the Worksheet Blues

An Article printed in the *Federal Way Mirror*

By Susan Kovalik

We know that homework causes stress and conflict, frustration and exhaustion.

We tell ourselves that homework teaches our children responsibility and good work habits, reinforces what they have been taught at school and helps them become more successful learners. Or does it?

On March 3 at Mercer Island High School in Washington State, Alfie Kohn, renowned educator and author, challenged this assumption in front of an audience of 500 parents and educators (half of whom were not from the island) with examples, some as near as with your own children. His five basic themes against homework assignments (as detailed in his book "The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing") include:

1. A burden on parents
2. Stress for children
3. Family conflict
4. Less time for other activities
5. Less interest in learning

Kohn detailed how the "myth" surrounding the assigning of homework is contrary to research and student achievement. He asked the audience what they wanted the children to be or become. The list included lifelong learners, curious, happy, excited, engaged, caring, competent, good thinkers and other words of good intention. After writing this list down, he asked which of these attributes were supported by homework. The response was varying degrees of wondering.

Kohn noted that the pressures put on children to perform and beat the competition undermines the emotional and ethical growth of their children. In those communities where there is incredible pressure on students to excel to get into the colleges of their choice, there is a higher rate of drug use, anorexia and of students "cutting" themselves. Students find the need to outperform their peers, which he calls "psychological toxicity" that actually leads to significant intellectual loss. Students have no new ideas as homework changes their orientation toward learning. They lead controlled lives while reaching for their parents' goals and trying to meet their schools' expectations — both goals which often lead to self-alienation.

“Homework is a destructive practice; it asks students to work a ‘second shift’ and parents to become the enforcement agent of the school system,” Kohn said. He recommends none before high school, and that high school homework should be aimed at encouraging students to think more deeply about things that matter and build excitement for the possibilities that lie ahead.

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Over the years I have observed what my children brought for homework, and now my grandchildren, and the significant difference is in the quantity and quality that passes as something students should spend time on. (In retrospect, schools did not have big, expensive copy machines when my children were in school. Hmmm.)

In most cases, what a child in elementary or middle school now brings home is “busy” work – not the kind of assignment that asks them to think, reflect, inquire, or discuss something of particular value. This year, I have watched my young friend let go of some of his curiosity because his unending pages of worksheets have to be completed, checked by parents, and turned in the next day. These single-sided papers have random work in arithmetic, enough problems to fill up three pages, and then paragraphs to read, often without context. I wonder if the teacher goes over the work and helps them develop a sense of what they read. In some districts, there is a check box for homework included on the report card.

With this push for homework, the first question parents usually ask upon seeing their children at the end of the day is, “Do you have homework?” The questions should be, “Did you learn something interesting today?”, “Did you do any experiments?” “Did you see something of consequence?” Amazingly enough, if they have done something interesting, they can’t wait to tell you.

Once it is determined that homework is necessary, a variety of directives will follow all evening and into the morning by parents who become the “homework monitors.” This is after parents have worked all day at their jobs and students have done a fair number of assignments in class.

I wonder what ever happened to hobbies, (beyond texting), such as riding bikes, going on hikes, engaging in board games, or using the brain in other ways to construct something that interests the student. When there is a professional development day, my young friend spends time at my office. This past Friday, he built an amazing robot out of a cardboard box and figured out how to wear it comfortably. He figured out where the arms should be, and how to attach pockets! It took several hours, and he was able to do it because he didn’t have “homework.” I supplied a hard hat and the extended grabber to pick things up. Then he used his imagination to develop scenarios for his imaginative creation.

Worksheet blues

An interesting fact regarding worksheets: no other country in the world gives their students the vast number of worksheets we give our children. And if worksheets made us smarter, we would have the most intelligent students in the world. Check with your school principal and ask about the cost of producing these one-sided sheets for a day, a week, or a month. Certainly in the time of budget cuts, this could be the first place to cut, as their usefulness is in question. Given the years I have been in education and the numbers of schools I have visited, my opinion is that there is a direct relationship between worksheets and under-performance. The bright students become bored and the struggling student is reminded each day how difficult monotonous learning is.



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From a brain-compatible point of view, the brain is looking for meaning and usefulness. Learning happens quickly when students are engaged in something of interest. When they can ask questions about what they are learning, and they can't wait to tell you about the amazing day they had at school, then you know learning is taking place.

For the high school student, they work long into the night and early morning, doing assignments that may or may not connect to their range of courses, may or may not build conceptual understanding across disciplines – or even see the connection between their courses and what is happening in the world around them.

Students can fail a class if they haven't turned in their homework, even if they pass every test with high marks and are participating. It's interesting that "busy" work supercedes knowledge.

Mr. Kohn read an email from a mother who explained that she had a conference with her elementary student's teacher, respectfully told her how she valued all the efforts that went into her day in the classroom and then the mother stated, "I am refusing the homework in my child's best interest." If the homework packet does not significantly impact the learning experience, consideration should be taken to eliminate it.

I recommend the book *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing*, by Alfie Kohn. Ask your children about what they are learning from the papers they bring home.