

Preface

This book is the product of over two years of extensive research, discussion, and reflection on the topic of homework by a team consisting of four public school educators, a university professor of teacher education, and a researcher on teaching. It describes the changes the teachers went through as they examined their own practices and pedagogy related to assignments for students outside the classroom. The book includes a brief description of the history of homework as well as an overview of current controversies and related research findings. Several examples are provided at each level (i.e., early elementary, upper elementary, middle school, and high school) of how good teaching can be supported and enhanced by meaningful homework.

Our team of teachers and researchers came together as the result of an action research conference at the Michigan State University College of Education in December 2007. Each of the four classroom teachers shared his or her personal journey in seeking more meaningful homework and the response of students and families. It became apparent early on that a set of common beliefs and strategies connected these authors and their experiences. Those beliefs and strategies are the foundation of this book.

Overall, these teachers have seen marked improvements in the attitude, attention, enthusiasm, and participation of students and their families. Each teacher could tell many stories of being approached by parents who were enthusiastic about an assignment and appreciative of the opportunity to make connections with their children. There are also many instances in which students have gone above and beyond what the homework projects called for, thus showing how motivating these assignments can be. These teachers, as well as others who are currently applying these ideas, work in a variety of K–12 settings ranging from rural, city, and suburban districts. This gives the authors confidence that you can replicate their results in your own practice, wherever you may teach. We recognize, too, that many teachers believe in the need to assign skills practice, and we encourage incorporating that practice into more meaningful assignments.

Although not written as a traditional text, this book should be useful as a resource in a variety of contexts. It would be valuable to support a group of teachers working together as a Professional Learning Community (PLC), as a yearlong school building improvement initiative, or as a study group for a specific subject area. The book could also serve as a text for a college or university course for preservice teachers. The “Guide to Your Professional Learning” at the end of the book supplies extra support to promote discussions and assist implementation of the ideas shared within the chapters.

TEXT ORGANIZATION

This book is divided into three sections: Part I: Realize the Purpose, Part II: Assemble the Plan, and Part III: Examine the Possibilities. Chapter 1, “What Is So Important About Homework?”, serves as an introduction, and Chapter 11, entitled “Still Not Convinced?”, concludes the volume.

Part I provides a rationale for meaningful homework, a thumbnail sketch of what some of the leading experts say about homework and authentic learning, and an inside look at why and how the teacher-authors of this text decided to change their homework practices.

Part II focuses on what you—the teacher—can do to make homework more meaningful for your students. It provides preliminary considerations for rethinking homework, offers a meaningful homework-planning guide, illustrates the connection between inquiry skills and meaningful assignments, and presents a rich description of elements that should be thought through at each phase of the homework cycle.

Part III connects you with your students by describing the general nature of the learner at specified grades. Each of the chapters designated by grade levels (early elementary, upper elementary, middle school, and high school) provides homework examples from each of the four core areas (and a smaller selection from the electives). Note that, although these chapters are subdivided by level, we believe that each maintains a degree of universal applicability, so we encourage you to spend some time examining each.