

Chalkboard

By

Dr. Randy C. Barrett, Superintendent
Gentry Public Schools

Homework. Part 4 and no more. I always abhor ending a series feeling like there was some part that I missed. If you have been reading for the last three weeks you know the issue I raised originally had three parts. There were three questions posed. Restated, the first was “Does a student who has to get help to complete his or her “practice assignments” have enough mastery of the skill to be asked to practice outside the classroom teacher’s supervision?” Restated, the second was “Should work done outside class should have any bearing on a child’s grade on his or her report card?” The last was “If we stopped giving homework grades, what incentive would the student have to do the work?”

The part that is missing in this series is a definitive answer to each of the questions. Understand, the questions were answered. But the answers seemed to take two forms- the ideal and the real. The ideal opinion said that students should want to do homework for the intrinsic value of the homework itself; i.e. doing homework will make you better prepared to do class work and to make better grades on exams. Reality says that the majority of students do not have the mental maturity to think “long term” rewards for “short-term” projects that seem to carry no reward. In a perfect world, students would prioritize homework above part-time jobs, extra-curricular activities, television, video games, and stereos. In the real world we live in homework often has to take its place in a long line of competing activities.

I have never questioned the intrinsic value of homework. However, current circumstances in education have forced me, in my role as “the guy at the top”, to rethink the issue. The “current circumstances” are that a public school’s success is being measured on the students’ performance on SAT 9 standardized test; the state Benchmark exams in grades 4, 6, and 8; the End-of-Level exam in Literacy in grade 11; the End-of-Course exams in Algebra and Geometry upon the students completion of those subjects; and to a smaller degree, the ACT. All of these instruments require the student to perform independently.

So stated, I will give you my current answers on the three questions. “Does a student who has to get help to complete his or her “practice assignments” have enough mastery of the skill to be asked to practice

outside the classroom teacher's supervision?" My answer is a conditional "Yes". The conditions are that the assignment be short, be based on the teacher's assessment, that the students have mastered the skill, and that the homework be graded immediately and returned to the student the next time he/she comes to class. My reasoning is that 10 two-digit subtraction problems can check for mastery as easily as 50 problems, takes less time to grade, and does not promote a child internalizing a wrong process, by repetition, should the teacher's assessment have been incorrect in terms of mastery.

"Should work done outside class should have any bearing on a child's grade on his or her report card?" I believe the answer is again a conditional "Yes". The condition is that the credit given to homework not be so great as to mask a student's ability to demonstrate that same level of skill acting individually on a classroom exam. To borrow an example from my recreational hobby of golf, it does not have the same value to hit the ball straight on the driving range if you always miss the fairway and always play your second shot from the deep rough or trees. Or perhaps a more pointed example would be the medical intern who can perform brilliant surgery on a cadaver but cannot do the same on a live patient.

The last question was "If we stopped giving homework grades, what incentive would the student have to do the work?" My answer there is that students or children are like us, their adult counterparts. They may see and understand the value of homework but require an external motivator to make them do it. I can honestly state that I enjoy my job. I like our students and staff and I like feeling that when I do my job well it contributes to the daily operation of the organization. But like it as I may, I would have to find something else to do if I stopped receiving my salary. Enjoy or not, there are obligations that I have which require me to get paid with more than the satisfaction of believing that my role contributes to student learning.

In summary, will homework continue to be given at Gentry Public Schools? Yes. Will some students continue to moan about having to do it? Yes. Will some parents sometimes want to pull their hair in frustration over trying to figure out how to help their child with it? Yes. Will some teachers groan about having to grade it? Yes. Will it continue to affect a student's grade on his or her report card? Yes. Will it be meaningful, be an extension of class work, be used as an assessment tool, and be graded promptly so that the student can be reinforced for accurate work or re-taught for incorrect work? The answer had best be "Yes" also or homework just might become a tradition in an organization that could not demonstrate proficiency when measured by current standards.

