

# Part I

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## Realize the Purpose

**P**art I is intended to provide you with the rationale for meaningful homework, a thumbnail sketch of what some of the leading experts say about homework, and an inside look at why and how the teacher-authors of this text changed their homework practices.

# I

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## What Is So Important About Homework?

**D**espite the current craze for standards, testing, and the need to learn more in order to be prepared for life, many students are less than excited about school and are not achieving at higher levels. Even high achievers often appear to be just “doing school”—a term used to describe a school system in which success depends more on going through the correct motions than on learning and engagement (Pope, 2001). Too often, what students are asked to do is neither memorable nor meaningful. One reason is that they find no purpose in what they are being asked to do—they see no relevant connection to their lives. To exacerbate the problem, teachers often abandon exciting and successful units that are not strictly aligned to the standards and assessments.

An important but often overlooked component of the learning cycle is homework. It has been the source of heated debate among educational researchers and practitioners (not to mention parents and students) for decades, but we are convinced that “homework done right” holds enormous promise for helping teachers and students address some of education’s most pressing challenges. Our classrooms and students are living proof of what is possible.

Now, we can almost hear you say, “You must be kidding!” We, too, had a litany of frustrations and often felt trapped given the pressures that bubbled up from multiple fronts regarding homework, which in most school systems seems to be viewed as a necessary evil rather than a valuable curriculum component.

Which of our former frustrations are you currently facing?

### **THAT’S ME!**

As a classroom teacher, do any of these scenarios mirror your experiences? If so, we hope this book will motivate you to take steps toward the alleviation of your homework frustrations. Highlight the responses that make you shout, “That’s me!”

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*I seem to get inundated with homework papers to check, so I find myself assigning work that I correct during faculty meetings, or when I'm chilling on the sofa after dinner, or that can be corrected by a volunteer.*

*With the increased pressure from NCLB, state standards, and the enormous push to cover content, I find myself simply asking students to do at home what we don't complete at school. New content and new skills end up being the norm.*

*I get so frustrated with the 50 percent who do not bother to turn in their homework—and often fail the course because of it. I feel like a failure.*

*I'm overwhelmed with keeping up with the district's pacing guide. I have to give homework that will keep us on track with other classes. If I do something different, I'll get behind.*

*I'm sick of the e-mail questions and complaints from parents about the assignments. You'd think I'd asked them to do the homework.*

*I forgot it; the dog ate it; my mom forgot to wake me up so I could do it; it's at my Dad's house—the list of excuses goes on and on. Why bother trying to get these kids to live up to my expectations? They simply don't care!*

*The principal is a stickler about assigning 20 minutes of homework a night for first graders, an hour for sixth graders, etc. It's become a real headache. I admit I do not put a lot of time into figuring out the tasks I assign. I base my assignments on the time I think they will take to complete.*

*I have to give homework that connects to our district's learning programs or kits. I need to make sure that students are getting practice with the concepts in our math, science, social studies, and literacy programs or else they might not do well on the district and state tests.*

*I'm pretty sure there are certain cliques that do their homework "cooperatively." With their high-tech savvy, it is so easy.*

*My students don't know how to do assignments that require learning skills. They don't know how to collect data or ask good interview questions. They and their families need assignments that are very structured or else they won't complete them.*

*We can have a perfectly engaging class discussion, but the minute I shift to giving the nightly homework assignment, the eyes roll, the nasty whispers begin, and the books slam shut. It's really deflating.*

*I don't feel confident enough to design assignments that are different from my district's packaged learning curriculum. I need more experience with those units before I can create more meaningful assignments that feel more risky.*

*Parents complain that they don't see how their kids can ace all the tests, yet get failing grades on their report cards because of the poor showing on homework. They simply don't get it!*

*I suspect there's a group of parents who do the homework for their kids and simply have the answers recopied.*

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## MEANINGFUL HOMEWORK

We define *meaningful homework* as tasks that enrich the in-school curriculum by challenging students to think deeply about important questions, apply their knowledge

and skills toward solving genuine problems, and creating authentic products that will be used in meaningful ways. Furthermore, out-of-school learning opportunities, which we refer to as *homework*, complement what goes on in school by exploiting home and community resources and environments. Many involve activities that are unfeasible or even impossible to do in classrooms or that are not cost-effective given the limited time students spend in the classroom. Yet they are vital components of a well-rounded education because they involve meaningful learning—a key concept related to motivation, which is linked to achievement.

Meaningful homework is oriented toward authentic forms of student achievement as described by Newmann and Wehlage (1993), who use the word *authentic* to distinguish achievement that is significant and meaningful from that which is trivial and useless. They suggest that teachers need to counteract two persistent maladies that make conventional schooling inauthentic: (1) the work students do often does not allow them to use their minds well, and (2) the work has no intrinsic meaning or value to students beyond achieving in school.

To face these challenges head on, Newmann developed seven articulated standards of instruction, which we believe are congruent with our understanding of meaningful homework. We highlight these ideas in Chapter 3 to provide a sense of the broader context within which we have come to understand the importance of meaningful homework. Each standard is a continuous construct that moves from less to more based on quality. By these standards, homework cannot be judged simply with a yes or no.

Additionally, we suggest that meaningful homework should match the goals of the lessons and units and should expand, enrich, or apply what is learned in school. The results should reveal qualitative changes in the ways students view themselves in relationship to the tasks and should motivate students to continue learning.

### **“We Believe” Statements**

To clarify further our definition of *meaningful homework*, we offer the following statements. This list of contentions forms the foundation of our understanding of meaningful homework and has guided the development of this text. We believe that meaningful homework should

- enrich an existing, successful, well-planned curriculum.
- enhance what was learned in school.
- connect to the big ideas from one or more class sessions.
- support, not replace, classroom instruction.
- provide opportunities to apply skills and knowledge learned at school in a real-world setting.
- reinforce connections between learning in class and life at home and in the real world.
- connect to current or future lessons, units, or projects.
- demonstrate authenticity by incorporating one or more of the following: allow students to organize information and consider alternatives, use concepts in a real way and do the work that real people do, address a problem related to the world beyond the classroom, or address an audience beyond the school (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993).
- be collaborative (if appropriate).

- encourage family participation.
- be used in class as a resource.
- facilitate student contributions to the classroom community.
- inform families about their child's learning.
- allow students to exercise choice and have a say in substantive elements of its design.
- generate excitement and genuine interest in learning.
- relate to learning goals and be at an appropriate level of difficulty, be feasible, and be cost-effective (Brophy & Alleman, 1991).

We also believe that teachers who design or assign meaningful homework should

- have a clear and direct influence on every homework assignment.
- model the assignments for students.
- contribute to the classroom learning community by completing the assignment themselves.
- expect diverse responses rather than a single predetermined answer.
- structure and scaffold the assignments for high rates of success.
- share with others and encourage an audience beyond the classroom.
- showcase or celebrate student work in order to increase completion.
- construct assignments for accessibility regardless of socioeconomic status or ability level.
- balance any disadvantages or difficulties students might face.
- include resources (or guidance about where to locate resources) needed for the assignment.
- maintain high homework expectations for *all* students.
- think of homework as an opportunity rather than as a penalty.
- view homework as something successful learners do.

*Note:* We recognize that there is a need and a place for basic skills practice (rote/reinforcement) at home. This type of homework is different from assignments with real-world connections and applications. In this text, we will refer to the two types of homework as *basic skills practice* and *meaningful homework*.

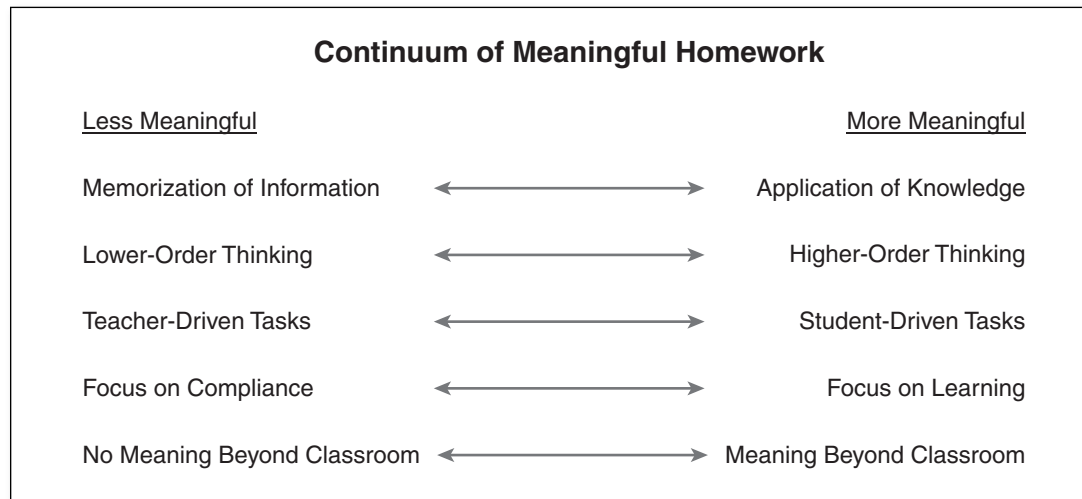
## OUR APPROACH

Currently, homework is on most schools' radar screens due to heightened concerns about accountability. Teachers are increasingly being asked to align curricula to standards, and instruction is in a time crunch due to the number of hours spent on testing. Many feel that the only way they can get through the material is to assign some of it as homework. Also, many claim that homework is necessary for improving student achievement—an assertion that is only partially supported by research. If this description resonates with you, you likely are wondering, "So what am I to do?"

We believe that homework is—and will continue to be—an integral part of the schooling process. Our approach calls for opening the realm of possibilities for homework with an emphasis on qualitative changes in the way students view themselves in relation to the task (Kohn, 2007). It focuses students on what they are doing,

what they are learning in school, and how they can create meaning and apply or extend it in their lives outside of school. In our opinion, homework should be geared toward high-quality learning that engenders in students a continuing desire to gain knowledge.

We suggest that homework practices be viewed as a continuum; thus, even incremental changes toward meaningfulness and authenticity have merit and therefore should be encouraged and supported.



## OVERVIEW OF THE TEXT

Your views about homework have been shaped by your personal experiences. So while you might feel forced to buy into your local school policies, in reality your behavior might be (unintentionally) a form of “doing school.” The intent of this book is to help you reconcile the issues surrounding homework, sharpen your beliefs about it, negotiate potential roadblocks, better understand the “whys,” and entertain the possibility of supplementing or replacing what you do currently with something else you would be willing to try. Think of this initiative as an *experiment*. Be patient! Change doesn’t occur quickly. Shifting the homework paradigm begins with you rethinking its purposes, functions, and possibilities. Then you can start educating students, the principal, and families about the “new blend” that takes advantage of the time students spend outside the classroom and strategically engages them in opportunities that validate the in-school content, enhance and expand it, and use the homework results to enliven subsequent in-class activities.

Start small! For example, suppose the goal is for students to learn the states and their capitals. Turn the “ugh” into a scavenger hunt. Provide students with a simple outline map of the United States and ask them to watch the national news for a week, skim newspapers and magazines, listen to the radio while riding in a vehicle, etc., plotting the states and capitals that are mentioned. Then up the ante by asking them to categorize the stories by type: health, disaster, political, economic, human interest, etc. After a week, have students bring their data to school for class conversation, encouraging individualization in its representation. What patterns emerge? What states and capitals were most represented? Least represented? Within what

contexts were they mentioned? Encourage students to find additional media sources where states and capitals may be represented. Encourage family involvement.

At some point, you may still feel compelled to quiz students on states and capitals. However, students will have begun to use the information, and they will gradually realize its value in becoming an educated person. A class conversation about the application of geographic facts in one's personal and professional life could spur this process.

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